

What Time Is It?

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UMCG

Happy New Year!” What?” you are probably asking. “Today’s a new year? No it’s not! New Year’s is a month away...January 1st not December 1st!” Well, today is New Year’s day...for us Christians. Last Sunday, in adult Sunday School, Jim Byrne did a marvelous job explaining the Christian calendar...our sacred calendar that is based on the life and teachings of Jesus. Today, we enter a sacred new year that starts the 1st Season of the Christian Calendar—the Season of Advent. The season in which we look back and remember the first coming of Jesus, and at the same time look forward to prepare for Christ’s second coming into our lives and our world.

The earliest followers of Jesus, his disciples, wondered about the details of Jesus’s proclaimed second coming into the world. They were curious about the nature and timing of Jesus’s return. And so one of the burning questions asked by disciples of Jesus in the first century after his death and resurrections was the nature and the timing of Jesus’s return. In other words, how will Jesus return...and when will Jesus return? Hence their question: What time is it?

One answer was provided by Mark’s Gospel, the earliest Gospel written, in the early 60’s of the Common Era (CE). Mark was clearly written from an “apocalyptic” perspective. What does that mean? It means that Mark’s Gospel fully expected Jesus to return suddenly, imminently and literally, descending from the skies to bring about the consummation of creation, the new heaven and new earth. Mark is crystal clear in expecting the risen Christ to return to earth before the first generation of his disciples passed away! (Mark 13:30!) The theological term for this approach to Jesus’s second coming is *apocalyptic eschatology*. (Eschatology, in case you’re wondering, is a fancy theological word for the study of the future, the “end times.”)

Well, it didn't quite happen the way Mark envisioned it. By the time Matthew and Luke's Gospels were written, in the mid 80's to 90's CE, several generations of Jesus's followers had died...and yet, Jesus still had not literally and physically returned to bring in God's Kingdom on earth. That raised a bit of a problem for the early church. (A problem that modern scholars refer to as "the delay of the Parousia" or second coming.)

And oh, by the way, we have seen this problem occur over and over again throughout history. Just Google Wikipedia's list of dates for the apocalypse. That article reveals how, throughout history, persons have gone out on a limb to predict the time when the world will end. Eventually that date and time rolls around, and guess what? The world doesn't come to an end! So what is one to do? One response is to admit one's mistake and adjust by claiming another date and time for the end of the world.

When Mark's apocalyptic understanding of Jesus's imminent, literal return to earth did not occur, that's exactly what happened. As mentioned, by the time Matthew and Luke's Gospels were written, in the mid 80's to 90's CE, several generations of Jesus's followers had died...and yet, Jesus still had not returned. So they adjusted. Their approach allows for an unspecified delay of Jesus's second coming. Their approach has been dubbed inaugurated eschatology. Put simply, Matthew and Luke understood that Jesus would come again to earth "some day." In this view, both the "end times" and "the Kingdom of God" were "inaugurated," had "already begun" in Jesus's life, death and resurrection. At some as yet unspecified time, Jesus would return, bring the world to an end, and establish the Kingdom of God on earth in its fullness. In this view of the future, we live between the times...between the "already" and the "not yet" full arrival of God's kingdom.

John's Gospel, written even later than Matthew and Luke, takes yet another tack in dealing with the delay of Christ's second coming. John portrays Jesus's second coming as basically having already occurred! In John's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus isn't coming back some day in the future. Oh no! The risen Christ has already returned! How? Through the spirit of the risen Christ! Where has the spirit of the risen Christ returned? In us! In our hearts...the hearts of Jesus's disciples! John's understanding of eschatology, of future

events, is called *realized eschatology*. Jesus's second coming, his return, is already "realized" in the sense that the spirit of the Risen Christ lives in us, now! "In our hearts." God's kingdom is already here...in us. (Easter song: You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!)

What does all of this have to do with Advent...preparing for Jesus's coming? Plenty! For starters, it means that we find a variety of understandings of Jesus's second coming, his "coming again," in our scriptures...something we need to take into account when we read each of the Gospels' particular view of Jesus's return. Second, it means we have to use our brains when pondering "the meaning" of Jesus's second coming for us today. Thank God, as Methodists, we don't have to check our brains at the door of the sanctuary. Like the NT, we allow a variety of interpretations of Christ's second coming. Third, it is reassuring to note that the scriptures themselves (as we clearly saw in today's reading from Matthew) tell us that even Jesus himself didn't know "the day or the time," or even the details, of his return. Fourth, the scriptures do, however, promise a "new heaven and a new earth," the consummation of the kingdom of God in which Christ, at his return, will reconcile all things on earth and in heaven. That is our hope and trust as followers of Jesus. Ultimately, that is what we're getting ready for!

*Dr. David Lose, in his preacher's blog, tells the story of Martin Luther (the 16th c. Protestant Reformer) being asked if he believed the world would end tomorrow. And if so, what would he do? Luther's reply? "I'd plant a tree, today." The point? "Confident of God's love and sure of God's promises about the future, we too can invest in the present, in the everyday and the ordinary, in the people and good causes all around us. For we have God's promise, in the cross and resurrection of Christ, that in time God will indeed draw all of creation not just to an end, but to a good end."

Getting ready means doing things now! Continuing Christ's ministry of bringing in God's Kingdom. Getting ready means *"loving the ones we need to love; finishing the work we've started; being reconciled to those who need us and those we need; being faithful to the people and tasks around us; undertaking both small and great endeavors for good and for God. Why? Because we know that Christ has come in the past. Christ comes to us today. And Christ

will come again in the future—all in the name of love. And we, and all of creation, are those for whom Christ is coming” ...to reconcile all things—in heaven and on earth. It’s Advent. What time is it? It’s time to keep getting ready for Jesus!

Amen.

*David Lose, “If the World Were to End,” Working Preacher blog, 11/20/2011