

**“Look Both Ways”**

**Introduction:** Some of you may know that Kirk Fackre’s parents, Gabe and Dorothy, were wonderful writers and teachers and theologians in their day. Sadly, Kirk’s mom died last month, but she certainly lives on through her writing. I was reminded of this as I was looking through my “advent” file a couple of weeks ago and came across an edition of what Kirk’s parents called “Theology and Culture Newsletter.” This is a publication which they wrote and regularly sent out to a wide audience. It sought to speak to how theology intersects with goings on in our culture. The newsletter I had saved dates back 22 years ago to Advent 1995 when Gabe and Dot mused on what they called “Christian Faith and ‘The Trial of the Century’.” “The Trial” refers to the OJ Simpson case which led many to ask: “What kind of world it is where people seem to get away with murder?” And, “What kind of world is it with these horrors of domestic violence?” Behind these two questions, the Fackre’s identified an all-important third query: “What kind of God is out there who lets these terrible evils happen?”

That last question, I don’t have to tell you, is huge. It’s the question that probably makes more atheists than anything else. Further, it’s a question that is age old, going back as least as far as the groaning of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, as Sharon had us consider last Sunday. And it certainly extends to any number of events in our world since the OJ Simpson case. The prophet Isaiah in this morning’s text gives voice to the world’s groaning as he cries out to God, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down...!”

When it seems as if God is not “coming down” to rescue us, three answers are typically given as to why not. One, God’s hands are tied. He may be all-loving, but he is not all-powerful. There are simply things he leaves up to us to work out the best we can. Two (the reverse), God is all-powerful but he’s not really all-loving. He could do something about what ails us but for reasons unknown to us, he chooses not to. Three, evil is not really real. One day, God will show that evil is actually good.

But none of these responses really works, for the Christian faith reveals that God is almighty, that God is all-loving, and that evil is real. What is missing from each of the conventional responses, note the Fackres, is the future. It is the declaration we will make in a few minutes when we share the Apostle’s Creed: “He [Jesus] shall come again to judge the living and the dead.” Interestingly, when the church year begins again each advent season, it begins with a look to this future. Advent begins with a text that reminds us, not of the coming of Jesus at Christmas, but of his return at the end of time. At that time, he, the King, will have the last word, and final justice will be done. Therein lies our hope.

You probably remember when your parents said, “Look both ways before crossing the street?” Well, our life of faith, lived as it is between the two comings of Jesus, is meant to be lived well by looking both ways. We live in the present by looking ahead to what Jesus promises to do in the future, grounded in what he has already done in the past. Let’s unpack this a bit.

**I. When the Son of Man Comes in the Clouds**

A. Now, let me be upfront and acknowledge that thinking about Jesus coming back to this earth doesn’t seem scientifically possible, and may even strike you as a fairy tale. A man who died and was buried 2,000 years ago doesn’t come back, at least according to the laws of nature. But, maybe the issue isn’t scientific but philosophic. Might the one who created nature, and those laws, be able to enter his

creation for good and gracious purposes? Certainly, such things as God taking on human flesh, or feeding the multitudes, or walking on water, or healing the sick, or raising the dead, or calming a storm, or exorcising a demon, or finally rising from the dead . . . such things don't happen, unless . . . unless they originate from the One who created nature in the first place, restoring his good and beautiful work. In point of fact, eyewitnesses saw the risen Jesus; they put fingers in his scars, walked with him, and ate breakfast with him. Earwitness heard his promise to come back. We would do well, at least, to pay attention.

B. So what does he say? One place he talks about his return is in our gospel text for today. It comes on the heels of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples about the impending destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. At the beginning of Mark 13, we find that Jesus has been at the Temple teaching. As he leaves, his disciples fall in step with him and begin talking about how magnificent the temple is: "What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" [13:1]. So enamored are they by what they see that you have to wonder if they've heard anything Jesus has said! But they definitely hear what Jesus says next: "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (13:2). Well, they must have been seriously chewing on that while walking down the hill from the city and then up to the Mount of Olives, for when they got there, they asked Jesus to tell them when all this destruction would happen. Many Jews, for whom the Temple was the center of their universe, associated the destruction of the Temple with the end of time, and so, apparently, these guys wanted to be prepared.

C. In response, Jesus gives them a hodgepodge of events which he summarizes under the heading "birth pains." They include false prophets, false Messiahs, wars between nations, earthquakes, famines, and persecution of Christians (vv. 5-9). Such things will happen, Jesus explains, but they don't indicate *that* the end is coming soon, nor do they serve to help predict *when* the end will come. Rather, when the end comes, it will be both obvious, and it will come so fast that there will be no warning. Cosmically, it will be like the sun and moon and stars going crazy, and the Son of Man riding the clouds: You can't miss it! Practically, it will be like the owner of a house coming back from a journey unannounced: There will be no warning. So, what does that all mean for us?

## II. Be on Guard! Be Alert! Watch!

A. Here's what we shouldn't be doing – trying to predict *when* the end will happen. If neither the angels, or Jesus, knows when that day or hour will come, but only the Father, we're wasting our time trying to predict from current events. Such a focus causes us to lose what we need to be about. Nor, on the other hand, should we be simply dismissing the return of Jesus as a fairy tale. There's no doubt in his mind that it will happen. As the parable of the fig tree indicates, the best we can know is that summer – the next season – is near. The "last days," a phrase that the biblical writers use, has begun. Once the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, which it was in 70 AD (which would be seen by the generation with which Jesus was conversing, v. 30), once this affirmation and vindication of Jesus, replacing the Temple as the true locus of God's presence, had taken place, the next major event in what we call redemptive history—the acts of God renewing and restoring his good creation—will be his return. It will be a time when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead; it will be a time when God gathers his loved ones to himself.

B. Jesus sums up our need to be ready for this event with three imperatives: Be on Guard! Be Alert! Watch! How are we do this? Well, we need to prepare, not charts, but our hearts. Paul describes

such preparation to the church in Thessalonica in terms of armor we are to put on. He affirms that the return of Jesus will happen suddenly, and unannounced, like a “thief in the night,” an image Jesus also uses as recorded in Luke (Lk. 12:35-40). So, we should be sober and awake: “But...let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thess. 5:8). Being ready, then begins with faith, with anchoring your trust in Jesus, looking to him to forgive your sin and begin a Spirit led process of transformation. It continues with love, not sitting around and doing nothing, or trying to predict the end, but working out and living out your faith in the way God in Christ has treated you, as you wait for God to redeem all things. And it perseveres through all sorts of difficult things by means of hope, trusting that God is all-powerful and all-loving and will put evil, finally, to rest, as he began to do in Christ on the cross.

Living faithfully in the present by looking ahead to what God promises to do through Jesus in the future, grounded in what he has already done through his Son in the past, is a little like, I’ve been learning, having cataract surgery! One eye gets repaired, and then you have to wait for the other one to get done. While you wait, you need to live, but it’s not easy as your good eye fights continually with your bad one, leaving you in a perpetually blurry and woozy state! But, the eye that’s been repaired, so wonderfully clear (which you can glimpse when you close the bad one), grounds your hope that when the surgeon returns and repairs your second eye, all will be beautiful.

As we live between the two comings of Jesus, may we remember to look both ways. May we look back with confidence that Jesus has come and has begun to make all things new. May we look forward with equal confidence, trusting that one day he will return to fully finish the job. And may these views free us in the present from anger, frustration, and hopelessness, and free us for loving others as Christ has loved us, bearing witness as we do so to the Jesus who has come, and will come again.