

First Sunday of Advent - Year Bi - November 30, 2014
Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”

In our gospel reading, Jesus warns us to be alert for we do not know when the time will come, when “God will be all in all.”ⁱⁱ In fact, we hardly know what time it is right now! By that, I don’t mean like when Yogi Berra was asked, “What time is it?” and he replied, “You mean now?” No, I mean that time is a problem for us, especially in relation to God. For we measure, and are measured by time; while God is timeless. Now, if we lived in a world completely separate from God, we could just go about our schedule and live life with its beginning, its fleeting moments, and its ending. But it isn’t that simple, because God, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all time, not only created our world; but in Jesus born of a human mother somewhere in the middle of time, God became a *very part* of our world, until the end of time. And so, for now, we and God inhabit the same time zone.

The problem is we look at the same time zone in different ways, as James Smith and other Biblical commentators point out. In the Bible, the Greek has two different words for time: *chronos* from which we get our word “chronology,” and *kairos* from which we get nothing in English that I know of! Our English language—so rich in a number of ways—does not even have a word to distinguish these different understandings of time that are crucial to biblical thinking.

Chronos as we know is clock time. It is not real in itself; it just measures the change in real things. So in a half an hour your hair dries, or your potted plant grows a millimeter; several thousand people die, several thousand more are born; a glacier melts a tiny fraction, and maybe somewhere some government collapses—all in the time it takes your hair to dry. But chronos couldn’t care less. It just goes “Tick, tock. Tick, tock.”

But kairos—the other dimension of time—cares infinitely. Kairos is God’s time, and God cares, about birth and about death and everything in between. God cares about governments and glaciers, and even about every one of your drying hairs on your head. God’s time, kairos, is measured not in seconds or minutes but in the eternal value of things, which means that God’s time—kairos—is that which gives meaning to our time—chronos. Frederick Buechner points out that “as human beings we know time as a passing of unrepeatable events in the course of which everything passes away including ourselves. As human beings we also know occasions when we stand outside the [mere] passing of events and [can] glimpse their meaning [and God’s presence, even God’s purpose, in them]. Sometimes an event occurs in our lives, [be it extra-ordinary such as] a birth, a death, or some [other moment] of unusual beauty, joy or pain; [or be it something seemingly ordinary such as sitting for a cup of coffee with someone, or at the office or home,] through which we catch [a kairos moment], a glimpse of what our lives are all about and maybe even what life itself is all about.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paradoxically the timeless God is purposefully present to whatever is going on at any time in our life, in every moment, yet often hidden in plain sight; and if we look beyond the surface of things we see that God's eternal presence is what gives meaning to our ever-changing times. God's kairos is forever coinciding with our chronos. However, I for one often find it hard to keep this vision of the integration of God's purpose (Kairos) with the passing of events in a busy day (Chronos). The eyes of my mind and heart are often clouded from the sacramental nature of the present moment, clouded often by a work—no, workaholic—ethic, as well as by a male and North American prizing of achievement, and by excessive worries; and from the stress created by a driven sense of immediacy combined with so many so-called time-saving things such as e-mail that may simply be bringing the future crashing in on the present that much more rapidly, like the video game in which the road rushes in upon the driver at ever faster and faster speeds. I'm reminded of and convicted by Thomas Merton's statement:

“...being attentive to the times of the day...the reason why we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God's own good time [-kairos]. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves, in prayer, a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.”^{iv}

Now, having said all this about God and us in the same time zone, conversely—and this is equally important—the sense presented in our gospel is a deep conviction that God is working out God's purposes regardless of how far each of us is falling short of the mark, and regardless of how horrible and at times hopeless the present world might appear. Advent is a season which begins with the message that ultimately we are not in control of our lives—and that our actions or inactions are not God's final word. It is at this time of year, at the beginning of our Advent season, that the mysterious genre of apocalyptic passages like our gospel text come up in our assigned readings. Biblical Apocalyptic writings are a call to wake up to spiritual reality in the midst of harsh realities, wake up to the spiritual reality that tough times are not the last word, nor the end of the world even if they appear to be the end of your world, but that God will turn all things toward good and in the end “God will be all in all”^v—the last Word.

In one real sense we do live in the last days, insofar as they were inaugurated by the birth and death and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus of Nazareth we had the astounding in-breaking of the fullness of God into human history and God's creation. In Jesus celestial powers were, and are, truly shaken; and the ultimacy of the power of fear, ignorance and death are being taken away. That is why this and other apocalyptic passages are read at the beginning of Advent, marking the advent or coming of the earth-shattering Jesus long ago in Nazareth, and as he comes again and again in our lives and fully and finally on some last Day.^{vi}

Unfortunately, these now ancient apocalyptic writings of Scripture have often been misappropriated through a false correlation with present realities and events. This has led repeatedly to the false conclusion, for example, that natural disasters of earthquakes,

storms or epidemic diseases, as well as human destructiveness—be it environmental or through religious or nuclear war—are somehow ushering in Christ’s Second Coming and God’s Final Day. This is not only wrong-headed but is also a dangerous and arrogant identification of our times, or our irresponsibility in our times, with the will and purpose of the timeless and all-loving God.

It is no accident that apocalyptic writings such as this passage from Mark insist that God acts not only in real-time historical ways as in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth and in and through our lives, but that God also acts in spite of us as is promised in the second or final coming when “God will be all in all.”^{vii} And so it is no accident that this gospel text through the centuries has often found favor with, and provided encouragement for people who are personally, socially, and politically under siege or who are up against overwhelming odds. The violence of the cosmic and natural disasters depicted in such writing give language and image and voice to how intensely terrible the world can be, but, ultimately, how God will have the last word and make things right.

And so, our call to Advent alertness and awareness is also an invitation to solidarity with all those who groan under the birth pangs of the new creation. Since the final coming of the Lord cannot be predicted, pinpointed, or prevented, the best thing for us to do is to remain alert and aware. What does that mean? It means we must accept fully our responsibility with regard to our times and invest each moment with its full weight of eternity.^{viii} We are not mere victims of passing time (chronos) waiting for the next good or terrible thing to happen. Rather, we are participants in God’s presence and purpose (kairos), helping to create changed situations for the well-being of others, ourselves, and all of God’s creation. In this way, every fleeting moment of chronos can be meaningful kairos providing us with more steady glimpses of God’s presence and purpose until Christ will come again and God will be “all in all.”^{ix}

ⁱ I am indebted to Fr. James Smith for some of the ideas in this sermon (esp. in *Celebration* (2002), Advent I)

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (London: Collins, 1972), p. 23.

^{iv} Thomas Merton, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 49; also Quoted in David Stendl-Rast’s “Man of Prayer,” in *Thomas Merton: Monk* edited by Patrick Hart, copyright the Abbey of Gethsemani (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974).

^v 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23

^{vi} Just a clarifying note about the literary genre called apocalyptic. Unlike any other form, it has a way of linking chronos and kairos by taking the present and drawing it back to the past, and then shooting it out into the future, in a kind of literary archery. Apocalypse simply means “revelation” and apocalyptic writing is a literary style in which the writer reveals the substance of certain visions which had been granted to him or her. Included are the end of the world, cosmic upheaval, all sorts of disasters marking the last days - elements woven together in the following way. Despite the mysterious, colorful, horrific, and obscure imagery of these visions, the reader could see in them some picture of present or impending events. And the drift of the visions was to encourage—to encourage by showing that, however bleak things might look like to the readers, they were in fact ultimately within the reach of God, who would shortly and dramatically

vindicate God and God's faithful people. Therefore apocalyptic as a style was a means of sustaining hope and perseverance among a persecuted people during periods when direct reference to their oppressors and their approaching downfall was dangerous or impossible. Again the logic of such writing was that present troubles and disasters, far from being out of God's reach, had actually been foreseen by God and prophesied at some earlier time. And the readers were encouraged to feel that if these prophecies of disaster had been so fulfilled, then the prophecies of salvation to come would receive the same fulfillment. And so chunks of history that were occurring or had occurred in recent memory, for example in the persecution of the early Christians along with the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans in the time of the writing of Mark's and then the other gospels—these contemporary events were dealt with in the form of a kind of literary archery. And so, this 13th chapter of Mark was written at a time of intense persecution in the early church in the 60's CE under the reign of the Emperor Nero; but the setting is pulled back to the late 20's/early 30's CE - some 35 years earlier - under the reign of Tiberius, and set in the context of the time just before Jesus' final showdown with the religious and imperial authorities in Jerusalem. And then it's all shot out to the final future, again to a picture of final vindication albeit through more pain and suffering.

This apocalyptic message that God, who is the beginning and the end of all time, is the same God who is working out God's purposes now at this present time - this serves as a vital corrective to the tradition that has emphasized that God only acts through our history and only in and through us human beings. Such a misappropriation of the truth of God's kairos working in our chronos has repeatedly occurred through the ages, for example, as kings, queens and knaves – as well as modern presidents and potentates - have claimed God's blessing upon their decisions and their propaganda and their wars, often leaving their people little, if any, theological room to dissent.

^{vii} 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23

^{viii} See Gerard Macginty, ed., Glenstal Bible Missal (London: Collins, 1983). As this wonderful British resource puts it,

“Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down....’ Once again at the beginning of advent, this cry reaches towards God, borne up by the assurance that our salvation has been achieved, though not yet fully worked out. This is because our God is a God who comes, and Jesus Christ is fully involved in this coming: ‘He is, he was and he is to come.’...Faced with the prospect of this Second Coming which can neither be predicted or prevented, faced with this lengthy vigil in the night of this world, whose end remains in darkness, the best thing for us to do is to remain always on the alert [and to live in full expectancy of the unexpected]. We must accept fully our responsibility with regard to our times and invest each moment with its full weight of eternity. Above all we should, like St. Paul, never cease to give thanks. But thanksgiving is not an expression of smug self-satisfaction. It is rather, an expression of gratitude to him who is the beginning and end of all things. Christians thus become the watchdogs of the world, a thorn in their century's side, overcoming sleep and igniting hope [and expectancy]. Come Lord Jesus!”

^{ix} 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23