



What Are You Waiting For?

TEXT
Luke 21:25–36

November 27, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We begin a new sermon series today called “What Are You Waiting For?” For Christians, waiting is not a passive activity. It is active. Our waiting is dependent upon our hope.

We are a few weeks away from hearing again the Christmas angels tell us not to be afraid. That’s what they always say — not because there is nothing to fear; it’s not that. Rather they say do not be afraid because the Spirit of God can be found in Jesus, and when all is said and done, God will be faithful. They tell us not to be afraid because God’s love has found us, and that love will never let us go.

We read these stories every year because there is never a year when we don’t need to remember them.

With the Christmas story coming toward us like a familiar friend, it may seem strange to you to hear the promise that Jesus will come again riding a cloud. Most folks I know prefer the story of Jesus coming the first time.

This may not be a text you need today. But if you don’t need it today, don’t forget it —tuck this text away for a while. There

will be a day when these are the words that save your life.

This text is what we call “apocalyptic language.” It has to be heard a certain way. That is not an unusual reality with speech. When you hear the words “once upon a time,” you know you have entered the world of fairy tale. They are words that have to be heard a certain way.

When you hear, “A priest, a rabbi and a preacher walked into a bar ...” well, you know you are not hearing a news report.

Apocalyptic language is a particular kind of writing that uses oversized vocabulary to paint larger-than-life pictures to speak truths that are too immense for everyday speech. And it is always language from the bottom. It comes from struggle. It is the way people talk when things seem hopeless; when chaos has overrun life; when everything we have depended on seems fragile — that’s when God’s people speak with apocalyptic speech.

Luke’s congregation talked this way because they knew the oppression of the Roman Empire.

So this is a text for the slave in rural Georgia in 1800.

This is a story for the Syrian child who wonders if the bombing will ever stop.

This is a story for the one who stares into the eyes of a spouse who can no longer remember you.

This is a story for the mom who worked two jobs today and will only be able to feed her children as long as none of them gets sick and needs to see a doctor.

This is a story for the child who lives her nightmares in the daytime because her father is violent.

This is a text for those who no longer have confidence that the things of this world are working. It is not a text that threatens ... be aware, the world may end. It is a promise of hope for those whose lives are so broken they fear that the world might not end. To them, Jesus says, “I will come again.”

We learn this from Christian faith: Hope is shaped by suffering and struggle. Hope has nothing to do with optimism or wishing. As Krista Tippett says, “Hope is a choice that becomes a habit that becomes spiritual muscle memory. It is a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be.”¹

So, as I said, I hope it is not a text you need today. I hope that all is well with your family and all is well with your soul, and that life has met you with grace

and blessing beyond deserving. So I hope you do not need this text today, but don't forget it; just tuck it away.

There are many who may not get through the day without the promise that Jesus will come again.

Now I want to clear this up: Jesus coming again, riding a cloud? OK, that sounds as strange to me as it does to you. Jesus, who lived 2000 years ago, coming back in some undisclosed tomorrow, riding a cloud no less? What kind of cloud do you suppose Jesus would prefer? A cirrus cloud? A cumulous cloud?

Yeah, that's strange. Many have read this text in a literal fashion — and it is strange. As early as the second century, a disciple named Montanus predicted that Jesus would return to a town called Pepuzza, which is now in Turkey.² In the 19th century, a preacher named William Miller predicted that Jesus would return in 1843. When that didn't happen, some were disillusioned, but others began picking later dates. More recently, Tim LaHaye and his *Left Behind* series peddled such misguided read of these texts.

They have been disappointed every time. Why? Because they failed to appreciate that this is apocalyptic language.

This is not a news account. This is apocalyptic language. It's not a prediction of what will happen; it is a metaphor of hope you can trust with your life. It is a promise that God will be faithful.

When the Bible speaks of the return of Jesus, the second com-

ing, the final judgment — when it speaks that way, it is stating a confidence that God will fulfill God's promises.

Jesus — and the early church after him — did not talk this way because he had some crystal ball into the future. They spoke this way because of the confidence they had in God's faithfulness. It is the expressed conviction that the will of God cannot be defeated.

This is not a threat; it is a promise. This is not bad news; this is hope. Because the will of God is that all of creation be blessed. The will of God is that all of God's children will know grace and love; that there is a place at the table for everyone; that there is justice in our relations.

Martin Luther King spoke of this Christian hope this way: the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. That is an apocalyptic message. Apocalyptic speech comes from suffering, and it speaks hope, and it takes the long view.

When Jesus says that he will come again, he is saying that when all is said and done, God will heal every brokenness. God will save every good. He is saying, the signs of crucifixion are all around, but do not lose heart, for God will be faithful.

Some of you may remember a couple summers ago, my brother Gene visited. Gene was born with a generous heart, but a very limited mind. At 55, he thinks like a 5-year-old. I told you that every time I talk with him, he asks if I talk about him

in my sermons. I always say yes. When he was here, so many of you came up to him and said, "Gene, we have heard so much about you."

You did that so well that at lunch that Sunday, he said, "Bwuddah, you are talking about about me too much."

More than anything in the world, Gene wants to drive a car. A red car is preferable. He's 55 years old, and he just wants to drive a car.

I say, "Gene, where you going to go?"

"I'm gonna come see you, give my niece and nephew a big hug."

"That's great, Gene. What are you going to do then?"

"I'll take you, and we'll go see Daddy. Don't tell him I'm coming."

"Oh, I promise, Gene, your secret is good with me." That's what he wants, just to drive a car.

Last time I visited him, we were eating at Shoney's Big Boy. (Do you know what that is?) We ordered the "cholesterol plate." We were talking about the trips he would take. I'll never forget this moment. He asked me, "Bwuddah, do you think I'll ever drive that car?"

"Yes, Gene. Yes, I do."

Now I know he will never drive a car. But that's not what he was asking me, not really. What he was asking me was, will Jesus come? What he was asking me is, will there ever be a day when all this that has gone wrong will be made right? Will there ever be a day when everything that has fallen apart will be put together? Will there ever be a day when

God will repair that which we cannot heal?

I said yes. I have no crystal ball, but I do trust that God loves all. And I trust that that holy love will transform us.

I trust that the cries of the early Christians facing oppression and persecution did not go unheard.

And I trust that the Georgia slave of 1800 knows freedom today.

I trust that the children in Syria will be able to play outside in peace.

And I trust that the moms captured by the crushing grip of poverty will one day set the table for feasting.

And I trust that the children who grow up in violent homes will someday know safety.

And I trust that Christians in the Middle East who are slaughtered will know resurrection.

I trust that the love of God will redeem all that is wrong in us and in our world.

I trust that because I trust God's love will hold on. I don't know how to say that very well, but the way Jesus said it is he would come again. Love is coming.

¹Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise* (2016), p. 11

²Eugene Boring, *Revelation: Interpretation: Commentary* (1989), p. 2

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.