



Finally Seeing What Has Been True All Along

TEXT
*Matthew 24:29–31,
36–44*

December 10, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In March 1968, President Lyndon Baines Johnson surprised many when he stated, “I will not seek, and will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your president.”

On September 17, 1796, President George Washington said the same, but his language was a bit different. He expressed it this way:

Friends and fellow citizens: the period for a new election of a citizen to administer the executive government of the United States being not far distant, and the time actually arrived when your thoughts must be employed in designating the person who is to be clothed with that important trust, it appears to me proper, especially as it may conduce to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now apprise you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being considered among the number of those out of whom a choice is to be made.

They said the same thing essentially; it’s just that the times changed, and nobody talks like George Washington anymore. And if you were to do so, folks might think you were a bit weird. However, to assume that Washington — and his strange way

of speaking — has nothing to say would be quite foolish. That speech of September 1796 is read in the halls of Congress every year on the 22nd of February.

Some friends and I recently read *King Lear*. In one passage that I love, Lear is in a rainstorm. As a king, he was unaccustomed to inconvenience, but here he is being pelted with wind and rain. It caused him to think of the lives the common people lead. He reflected:

*Poor naked wretches,
wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this
pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless
head and unfed sides
Your looped and windowed
raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these.
Oh, I have ta’en too little
care of this.*

The times have changed, and nobody talks like that anymore. If you did talk like that, folks might think you are a bit weird. But to think that Shakespeare — and his strange talk — has nothing to say would be quite foolish. What’s my point? Listen to this:

Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of

heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Nobody talks like this anymore. This is apocalyptic language, so comfortable and at home with the biblical writers, but it sounds weird to us. But these parts of the Bible, so strange in their vocabulary and imagery, to think that they are passages we can just skip over, well that would be foolish — particularly these days.

So what does this strange and unusual speech of Jesus returning on the clouds of heaven ... what does it say to us?

First, let me tell you what it doesn’t say. Throughout history, there have been folks who have read these passages literally, pretending that this is some code, and when you figure it out, you know when Jesus will return — even though the text says that not even Jesus knows the time — but they figure out the time.

In the second century, there was a Christian named Montanus. Montanus read the apocalyptic writings of scripture and was convinced that Jesus would return to a little village named Pepuzza. It's in modern day Turkey. Of course, Jesus did not return. Montanus was wrong. But that hasn't stopped a long line of folk through the centuries — including Jerry Falwell — who figure out just when and where Jesus will return. They quit their jobs; they stand on the roof and cast their eyes heavenward and wait for Jesus.

So don't do that — at least not the “quit your job and stand on the roof” part. But waiting for Jesus ... there is nothing foolish about that. Stick with me.

Waiting is not something I'm great at. I'm impatient in traffic. I don't like to walk slowly. I can be patient in meetings, but only if we are getting things done.

I have told you before of the time when I was taking a sabbatical that you granted me. I was studying at the seminary. I didn't have a car, so I walked to a nearby McDonald's. I wanted a cup of coffee. That was all, just a cup of coffee.

There was a guy in line in front of me. The cashier said, “May I take your order?”

“Give me just a minute,” he said.

I thought, “Here we go.”

“I just can't decide,” he said. “I was going to get pancakes, but that Egg McMuffin looks good. Is the Egg McMuffin good here?” What do you mean is it good? It will kill you. The cashier and I made eye contact. I just wanted

a cup of coffee. “I'm thinking,” the man said.

And I was thinking, “How can you not know what you want? They haven't changed the menu in 40 years. Just get the biscuit, man!” I started to walk out, go find coffee somewhere else. I didn't have all day. But then I started laughing at myself. I was on sabbatical. I didn't have an appointment for three months. What's the hurry? I'm pitiful at waiting.

So this is the truth. Waiting is hard work — because you are not waiting unless you are actually waiting for something. That sounds so silly, but I think it's important. We are not waiting unless we are genuinely waiting for something.

What are you waiting for? The most important things for which we wait, they don't come quickly. It may seem they don't come at all.

If I understand the text, it is not teaching us how to figure out when Jesus returns. It teaches us who to be when he hasn't.

There is a tomorrow that brings something for which we hunger. What are you waiting for? The early church was waiting for Jesus — not Jesus as a guy to ride the clouds, but the meaning of Jesus; the promise of Jesus; the Jesus who could make everything right. That is what gives our lives meaning.

Carol and I used to live in Columbia, South Carolina. I served the Seven Oaks Presbyterian Church. Behind the church was a large grass field, as big as a football field. Often on Saturday mornings I would be there

in my study, hammering out a sermon. Through the window, I could see a young adult from our neighborhood bring his dog to run in that big field. His dog was a greyhound, and that dog could run. He would run from end to end, darting around, chasing I don't know what. He had no idea where he needed to go, but it was clear he thought he was late. He never stopped moving until the guy called him back, folded themselves back into his Honda Civic and drove away.

Sometimes I feel like life is like that dog. We run here and there, going as fast as we can, but not really going anywhere — because there's not really anywhere to go. That's what some say.

There are those who argue that there is no goal, no purpose, no real meaning in our lives. We are here by accident. We survive by conquest. And in the end, there is nothing — no purpose, no redemption, nothing. Eat, drink and be merry, for when it's over, it's over, and none of it matters. Life is just an accident. You spend your life running, but you aren't going anywhere because there is nowhere to go.

But the testimony of the Christian faith is that there is a purpose to your life. You are living toward an ultimate hope — a hope that is long in coming, but a hope that can be trusted. For this is true in the end; and we all come to the end. In the end, when you and I have taken our last breath, when this whole world has taken her last breath, there is only God.

The whole universe is a creature, and all creatures are finite.

All creatures have a beginning, and all creatures have an end. And in the end, there is only God — the God who redeems; the God who loves; the God who makes all things new. That’s what the church is talking about when it says in the end, “Jesus comes to us.” Every promise for which he died is fulfilled.

It’s not a story about Jesus of Nazareth surfing the cumulus clouds. No, this is the testimony to the church. It says:

To the people who wait for justice to roll down like waters,

To the people who wait for swords to be beaten into plowshares,

To the people who wait for the shattered pieces of our broken hearts, and our broken relationships to be gathered up and made whole,

To the grief we know because our communities pass too many people by ...

Don’t lose hope, for the redemption for which you wait ...

The love for which you wait ...

The healing for which you wait ...

It will come.

I think this old promise has many lessons for us today, but just this one thought. This testimony speaks a healing word to the immeasurable tragedy that people face every day. There is tension in Israel, and there are some kids who will pay the price.

A few months ago, I had never heard of Rohingya people, the Muslims in Myanmar who are experiencing genocide — and it is estimated that over 600,000 of them are refugees today.

And I still pray for the Syrian refugees, so many of them children, too many of them killed by battle or lost at sea. The world can’t call their names. There are fires in California, and now reports that over 1,000 people have died in Puerto Rico in the wake of the hurricane. It’s daily.

But the tragedies do not simply come in groups. They come name by name, and life by life — and in time, they touch us all. And so often, the wrongs simply cannot be made right.

I sat in St. Joe’s Hospital and held an infant in my arms, a little child who had died. Tears were running down his mother’s cheeks. This little one didn’t live long enough to know his own name, to know how deeply he was loved. No one caused it, it was just tragic — heartbreaking tragedy. And there is no way for it to be made right, no way to fix it. It is a heartbreak she carries forever.

She sobbed, grieving what was lost, and even more so, grieving what never had a chance to be. Her sobs joined the sobs of mothers from the beginning of time who have wept when injury and injustice, when disease or oppression attacks their children.

The promise of God is that in the end, we are not lost — for God weeps for God’s children too. In the end, there is only God — a God who comes to us because he simply cannot stay away, a God who draws us all to Godself because God cannot stand to let you go.

As the old strange language puts it, *And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call,*

and they will gather his children from the four winds.

I don’t know if you are waiting for that day, but you can — because it’s been true all along. It’s strange language, yes. But the promise is that, in the end, there is only God. And because God is love, not only will you not be lost, but God will take the fragile and fractured pieces of our lives and make us whole.

So we wait, and we join with the earliest Christians in their prayer, when they prayed, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

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>.