

Are we there yet?

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Matthew 24: 36-44 and Revelation 3:1-6

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³⁶ “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son,^[a] but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day^[b] your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

To the angel^[a] of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits^[b] of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. ⁶ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

I can't get enough of apocalyptic Christianity. I think this may be about the fact that the Bible says that the day and the hour of the end of days is unknown, and yet so many people are so anxious about it they predict it. And while that sort of “end-times” prophecy may seem to come from the more “extremist branches” of Christianity, Mennonites are no strangers to this. Claas Epp, as I learned in seminary, was a Russian Mennonite minister who was convinced the second coming of Christ was going to happen on March 8, 1889. He thought that Christ would meet his faithful church in Central Asia, and that his church was actually the church Philadelphia as discussed in the book of Revelation. In 1880 they set out on a trek to find this mysterious location and ended up somewhere near Turkestan. However, with Mennonites being non-resistant, problems arose when robbers came after them. Someone was murdered, and it strained everyone's pacifist beliefs. And of course, March 8 came and left. Epp then said his prediction was based on a leaning clock, so he predicted March 8, 1891. When that day came and passed, Epp became more fanatical and told his congregation that he was the Son of God. After this his congregation started to dwindle, for obvious reasons. Claas Epp thought we were there...but we weren't there yet.

My own experience in apocalyptic Christianity happened when I was very young. I think I've mentioned this in a sermon before but I remember a very intense sermon by a fundamentalist pastor saying that there's no point in, as he put it, "worrying about the trees," because Christ was coming soon. Christ would take care of the trees. This ran in stark contrast to what I was learning in school about recycling, conserving water, and using less fossil fuels. I got my family to recycle and I biked when I needed to go uptown and even though it was less than a mile, super safe, and completely bike-friendly, I felt like an environmentalist hero. I asked my Sunday School teacher about what the preacher had said and she told me I worried too much. The next time I thought about the end times was with the popular book series, *Left Behind*, which my fellow evangelicals read as if it were a supplement to the Bible. My mentor took me to see the movie. I was quite honestly terrified, mostly of being left behind myself and facing the great tribulation because I didn't pray as much as I should or was too bossy. These folks in my early years thought that we were almost there...but we weren't there yet.

In fact, maybe, just maybe, the question of "Are we there yet?" misses the point.

This Matthew text, and to a certain degree, the Revelation text, talk about the Parousia, which is just a fancy Greek word for the Second Coming of Christ. This Matthew account links to Mark's account in chapter 13. Matthew takes Mark's idea and expands on it. Mark's text, also often used for Advent, talks about bridesmaids, talents, the faithful servant, and the judgement of nations. But Matthew has a particular eschatological point of view. Matthew takes it from the point of view of the Great Flood.

Scholars believe that Matthew was written around 80 AD, encouraging the readers to remember Jesus' expected return after waiting around for quite a while without it happening. Commentator O. Wesley Allen states that Matthew's author's prerogative is not so much asserting a literal interpretation of the Second Coming, rather, they encourage readers to live into the present reality of the Kingdom. Matthew's author considered the first coming of Jesus to be historical and the Parousia to be eschatological, asserting that the church will always live at the turning of the ages. What Matthew is trying to do is answer that age old "already-not yet" question: How are we to live into the salvific knowledge of Jesus birth, death, and resurrection and also wait for the "not yet" promise of the eternal kingdom of God? God's people are asking, "Are we there yet?" and the answer from the Gospels is "No, sort of."

A lot of our apocalyptic schemas come from 1 Thessalonians and the book of Revelation, which was also read today. Those then have been interpreted into modern-day cautionary tales regarding being alert at all times for the heavens to be rendered open and Jesus to come down dressed in white, causing all the "true believers" to evaporate. Planes will be de-piloted, cars will be de-personed, nuclear plants will be without their physicists and then all heck will break loose. And that certainly is one interpretation. And it's a popular one.

What commentator O. Wesley Allen proposes is that the author's use of the flood narrative indicates that the flood took away the unfaithful and left behind the faithful. So in our text, two workers are in a field. The unfaithful one will be taken away, while the faithful one remains.

Two will be working in a mill, and the unfaithful one will be taken away, and the faithful one will remain. Matthew puts a reversal on our usual narrative of “rapture” and indicates that maybe it will be the unfaithful who will be taken away, as in the flood.

Matthew’s author is likely using a metaphor and not actually spelling out what will happen at the Parousia. As Allen puts it, they use “current existence using future imagery.” While we do rest on God’s grace, that does not mean we throw up our hands and wait for Jesus to sort us all out. We have all the more responsibility to do on earth as it is in heaven. With 1 worker leaving while the other remains, it means double the work for the person remaining. And so we, as faithful followers, have double the work to do.

The Gospel of Matthew really drives this point of “more work to do” home. The reference in Matthew 25 is of the 10 bridesmaids who were prepared and ready with oil as opposed to those who weren’t, those who managed their talents well in Matthew 25 were “rewarded” with more responsibility than those who didn’t manage their talents well, and those who didn’t faced apocalyptic judgement. And also in that 25th chapter, Jesus contrasts those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, help the sick, and visit the imprisoned. The unrighteous don’t do this and receive punishment. Those who do? They are left behind to inherit the kingdom of God, where there is more work to be done!

It’s easy to hear these “extra responsibilities” and think of them as a burden, but in the Gospel writer’s word, they are a gift from God. We are transformed in this time of Advent in the knowledge of the coming of Christ. In this Advent period, the Church is invited to participate in the transformation of not only the Church itself, or the individual lives of Christians, but the whole world! Matthew’s vision of the Parousia gives us a chance to fulfill the prayer and be co-creators with God in making God’s will be done, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

This directive from Matthew’s Gospel ties quite well to our text from Revelation. The exhortation there is to “Wake up!” Our deeds have been found unfinished. If we are not alert, the coming of Christ will be like a thief in the night. The church in Sardis has a reputation of being alive, but is actually dead. Metaphorically, I’m assuming. I’m wondering if the church in Sardis is having the same issues as the unprepared bridesmaids, or those who don’t know how to use their talents, or the unrighteous who do not feed the hungry or tend to the sick. They appear dead, or asleep, with their lack of action in the world around them.

I feel the need to mention that being “at work” in Christ’s mission in the world is not the same thing as capitalism’s idea of “productivity” or worse yet, the myth that our worth as Christians somehow lies in “how productive” we are in God’s kingdom. If there’s anything that our Advent texts teach us, it’s that God’s coming reign will not look anything like the current order. The way our society prioritizes output and “results” can start creeping into our Christian discourse. Some strands of Evangelical Christianity put an emphasis on “soul winning” and how many people one can lead to Christ, or with any strand of Christianity, how many “good deeds” you did for the kingdom. We can all fall into the trap of thinking that our “good works” save us.

This is not at all surprising. We all have this inherent sense the the more we do, the better we are. But the truth of the matter is, God looks at our hearts, thoughts, and intentions. Kingdom work is not quantifiable. Kingdom work is cooperative. Kingdom work is for all of us. There is no prize for “getting there first.” The only “firsts” there are in God’s kingdom are those who are last. There actually is no end goal or “arrival,” save that of Christ’s return. This is joint work that we do WITH Christ, not only for Christ. And we do it in community.

But with this season of Advent, we also want to keep before us the coming of Christ in the form of a baby in a manger. We hear this every year: this is a season of waiting. This is a season of hope. And in this reality, we acknowledge that we’re tired of waiting! We are constantly asking “Are we there yet?” And what is there to hope for? We live in risky times. Our news feeds remind us of not only the chaos in the world, but of our own mortality. Sometimes we aren’t “woken up” to change the world, sometimes we’re “woken up” out of fear. That fear can be paralyzing. Sure, there’s kingdom work to be done, but where do we even start? Sometimes our fear is not motivating, and being motivated out of fear isn’t a healthy place to start. After all, “fearing eternal damnation” is not why Christians follow Christ, or at least, it shouldn’t be.

So yes, we are being called to work before we can get there. I think the thing to remember is that we are not called into this work alone. No one has asked us to do this on our own, and no one has called us to finish it. We aren’t “there” yet, we’re not going to arrive. The arrival is not why we do this work.

This is part of the issue with apocalyptic groups, or any stream of Christianity that has us waiting for “the end.” What happens to hope when it’s deferred to an unknown day or hour? We run the risk of telling the very people we are called to serve that if they just wait, at some point, things will get better. No one’s saying they won’t, but what are you saying about now? We get dangerously close to turning away from injustice, forgetting our neighbor, and forgetting the marginalized when we throw up our hands and let God sort it out. When we just “wait for it to be fulfilled,” we diminish our role (including our responsibility) and keep those with less access and privilege than us in some sort of scary purgatory where we tell them to just wait until it one day gets better.

As I stated before, I grew up in a denomination that was all about “rapture theology.” This “rapture theology meant that if you were fully trusting in God, you wouldn’t need to worry about global warming, or warring countries, or economic instability. You just needed to worry about being right with God, and letting God take care of the rest. As was the case with my preacher who thought we were all too concerned about trees.

But being right with God also means being right with one another, and if we aren’t right with one another, we have no business eagerly awaiting a rapture moment.

Part of our task here in this Advent season is, as I said before, is to wait. This is held in tension with getting our work done now. But we don’t like to wait. And maybe part of our issue with that that is our lack of acquaintance sitting with discomfort. Living in the here and now is

difficult, and thinking about the future can seem so much more promising. In this season of waiting, we have to sit with our discomfort, and we do so on a number of levels. It's just plain difficult. Making it through the day to day can be painful. This is true for so many of us. My intention is not to diminish that, but to simply acknowledge it.

We also are uncomfortable with not knowing. We know this Christ event is going to bring change and revolution but that can be both exciting and scary. But if we don't acknowledge the discomfort, or notice the tough feelings that surround waiting and the mental gymnastics of being hopeful (and for some of us, that's a very real metaphor), we're not being very honest with ourselves, and we aren't being a very good witness to others who may also be sitting in discomfort. Without sitting with it, we're never able to manage it. We stuff it down and pack it away without every fully owning our discomfort. Without sitting with it, we can lose ourselves to hopelessness. By sitting with our discomfort, we can learn from it. We can be reflective of what it is about waiting that has us so upended. And we should also remember, discomfort is not always the enemy. Sometimes discomfort can give birth to difficult to digest insights about ourselves or others.

But I don't want to make the mistake of interchanging discomfort for pain. I'm not advocating we sit and wait and learn from our pain. While for some that is fruitful, I have never personally found that it brings me closer to anything but hopelessness and despair, the exact trap we are not supposed to fall into this Advent. Pain I try to give to God, use healthy coping mechanisms, work on transforming. Discomfort, on the other hand, is a sign we should pay attention. What is it that has us feeling discomfort over not being there yet? What do we notice about ourselves?

In this season of Advent, we experience a lot of feelings. We wait for the coming of Christ, as illustrated by our Bible texts. We prepare, we get ready, and that means doing the kingdom work right here, right now. We sit with our discomfort, that discomfort that comes from not knowing, of not being in control, or being bothered by the arrival of Christ. All these feelings have us asking, "Are we there yet?" Advent, as I stated before is one big, "No, sort of."

What would it mean if we lived not for some eschatological event, but for the here and now? What would it mean if we didn't simply "bide our time" until Christmas? What if that excitement of the coming of Christ could be in the here and now? What if we did kingdom work now? If we acted justly now? If we fed the hungry now? If we helped the sick now? The coming of Christ is every day when we work to help immigrants in our community. The coming of Christ is now when we seek the welfare of our church family. The coming of Christ is now when those of us who are normally comfortable are suddenly uncomfortable, and those of us who are normally uncomfortable are comforted.

The coming of Christ happens when the old order of things has passed away. What passes away is malice, lying, war, prejudice, evil-doing, sin. Those ways in which we order our world that privilege a small, select group of people and not the whole of God's people. The coming of Christ happens when we realize that for a very long time we've been benefiting from a system that oppresses our siblings in Christ, that keeps us on top while time and again pushing those

on the margins to the bottom. The coming of Christ happens when we realize that our silence and our tacit complicitness has put us in the same boat as the oppressors. This realization Immanuel, God with Us.

But the whole of Christ's presence isn't only found in these hard truths. The work of the Kingdom, that which Christ has set out to accomplish, seeks to dismantle that which has kept down our siblings in Christ for far too long. The Kingdom work that we are called to do has us sitting with our discomfort, and learning from it. The kingdom work we are called to do has us setting aside the idea of our own supremacy. And if you think that you don't think about yourself like that, setting aside the thought that you don't have any power or that you don't benefit from a system that dehumanizes and makes life more difficult as well as deadly for black, brown, and queer people. That work of loving one another and looking after one another's welfare? That is part of our Kingdom work. That is one piece in the huge jigsaw puzzle of the Kingdom that need to be, as stated in the Lord's Prayer, "on earth as it is in heaven."

So our focus should not be on the day or the hour. The question should not be "Are we there yet?" in terms of the arrival of Christ. The end goal is not Christmas, or even Epiphany. The end goal is Christ but the means is compassion, love, justice, kindness, and mercy. Seeking equality for our neighbor. Loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. And at the heart of it all, loving ourselves. So, if that's what at the heart of the arrival of Christ, are we there yet?