

Sermon: Christian Eschatology
Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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Today begins the new church year as the first Sunday of Advent has arrived. Advent has, in the modern day, come to be the 4 weeks of preparation for the coming of our celebration of Christmas, but this was not the original intent of the season. Advent, which literally means “to come”, was a 4 week time period within the life of Christians to particularly mark the promise of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Now, the Second Coming with all of its fiery threat of apocalyptic judgment and damnation or vindication and the final and complete arrival of the kingdom of God is not an area of Christian theology that we more liberal Protestant Christians give much attention to. In case you haven’t noticed, I haven’t preached much on the second coming or the rapture, the apocalypse and God’s fierce and exacting judgment therein. I apologize for those of you who come each Sunday hoping to hear whether or not you are among the elect to be taken up into heaven or will be left behind at the final judgment. I guess you know by now that I haven’t quite figured that one out – there are still a few of you that I am a little on the fence about – no I’m just kidding.

The reason you don’t hear me talking much about the final judgment and the second coming is because of the violence and wrath that is often associated with God’s action around the end of times. I’d say that it’s only a matter of the way it has been interpreted over the years, because it has been used to claim Christian supremacy over others, which seems to go against everything else Jesus was saying, but still to read the scriptures like the one we have for this morning you gotta face these end-of-time or eschatological claims. To be clear about terms – eschatology is the study of last things or end times. You’ll also hear the word apocalypse in reference to the end of time which literally means an unveiling or final revelation of what it all means. And then you might even hear reference to the Parousia, which is the Greek word for the Second Coming. And then of course there is the rapture which is a particular way of understanding the Second Coming held by certain evangelical Christians based upon a passage in Thessalonians where 7 days before the Second Coming Christians will be saved by being

drawn up into heaven. In any case these references of the end of time, the final unveiling, the final judgment are fairly prominent in scripture and are found on Jesus' lips more than a few times. In Paul letters too, he speaks of us living in the in-between times, in between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. Paul is often encouraging his readers how to live in the now of the present in light of the "not yet" of the final fulfillment because they thought that Jesus' second coming would happen within their lifetimes, but as time wore on Paul, they had to be encouraged in their living this in between state which is proving to be drawn out generation upon generation over 2000 years now. So then Advent became a specific time in the church year to help us remember that in fact we are still waiting and not to lose hope nor to lose the vision of this final fulfillment, that there will be a final reckoning and God's plans and purposes will be fulfilled and complete.

And this is important, despite some of the strange and triumphalistic views surrounding it. Christian Eschatology does hold some valuable perspectives that are well worth ruminating upon, especially when we stick to the fundamentals of how and why scripture has this emphasis and refuse to get too simplistic with bumper sticker eschatology like; "Warning – In case of rapture this car will be unmanned" or "Jesus is coming, look busy".

1. First of all, what Christian eschatology claims is simply that there is history and inherent in the very notion of history, which is a gift to the world from the Hebrew people, actually, is that it's going somewhere. Human existence is not circular but rather linear in its movement towards some future. And the movement is not just a careening out of control to some random future, but rather there is a purpose, a direction, a fulfillment that is arriving for us individually but even more importantly for us corporately as well for existence itself will be fulfilled. This is what Christian eschatology holds out for. It suggests that just as all of this began in God it will end in God as well. God is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, our source and our destination.

2. Secondly, Christian eschatology reminds that we humans are not ourselves in control, determining, alone, where the future is going. I know we Americans especially don't like this notion but it seems to me to be a pretty crucial one for us to come to terms with in this day and age, to acknowledge that we are not the be all and end all, that this earth doesn't exist for our sakes, that we are dependent, inter-dependent, that we are not a bunch of individuals but we are "interindividuals" as the anthropologist Renee Girard would say, only able to exist due to our dependence upon the things around us. And we do not have the capacity to see it all and hold it all, this immense web of interconnectedness and so we have no idea how any choice, any decision we make might effect that web of existence which is why we must be continually remember to let go and let God. Advent reminds us for a time to give that tactic of living a try – let go of what seems to be driving you into the ground, us into the ground and let God have it. Christian eschatology, ironically, is about humility not hubris. Its not "we are Christians and we will be saved and taken into heaven and you won't!" But rather "all of this is not ours to know, to have, to control, but God's." "But concerning the day and the hour, Jesus says, no one knows, only the Father." And yet how many sects have arisen claiming to know exactly that??!
3. So Christian Eschatology proclaims that not only is God in control and that there is a purpose and trajectory to history, but thirdly that we are, in fact, accountable to how we live within this history and within God's good creation. This is where judgment enters into the equation of eschatological thinking. To say God holds all of this existence and we do not is also to say that we are accountable to something, someone, greater than ourselves. We must be accountable to the One who gives life and presence to all that is and declares it all good and beloved. Being created in the image of God we have the freedom and capacity to be creators ourselves which has its shadow side of being able to be

destroyers as well. We don't have to look too far for evidence of the human capacity to create nor destroy do we? But the whole notion of God's judgment is to suggest that there is an order, a right and wrong, a good and an evil, a sense within us of a better and more fulfilled future and an awareness that we are not there yet, and that if God is in control of where this is all going then what is good and right and loving will finally win the day and what is less than that will be judged as such and fail. The prophet Isaiah and the other Hebrew prophets speak of this judgment as God's commitment to justice for the poor and the oppressed and a ceasing of war. In order for God's mercy and justice to reign there must be judgment against those forces, those people, those systems that create injustice and warfare and rejection of mercy. In our Christian scriptures, soon after the one we have for this morning, Jesus proclaims this coming time of judgment and says in no uncertain terms how God will judge: for I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, I was naked and you clothed me, a stranger and you welcomed me. The judgment of God is necessary if there will finally be a righting of all that is wrong, a justifying of all injustice, a healing of all that is broken. Now what exactly this judgment looks like is not clearly delineated in scripture I'd say, there is mostly metaphorical images that are connected to it. But suffice it to say that Christian Eschatology holds out that we humans are accountable to something, to someone greater than ourselves; namely the One who created this world that we are blessed to live in.

And so those are the 3 central points of Christian eschatology that Advent invites us to live with and reflect upon during these weeks leading up to Christmas: that there is a direction of fulfillment to this crazy course of history that we are living, that God is finally in control of that process and that we are accountable to this God of love, whose self-giving presence was revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some Advent questions to live with based upon our Christian eschatology could be these:

1. How do we live in these in between days so as to further enhance, promote, and participate in God's coming kingdom of mercy and peace and justice?

2. If love, mercy, nonjudgment, care for the poor, love of enemy are truly the measuring sticks to which our lives are being held accountable, then how are we doing with them? And maybe one more...

3. Can we refuse the exhaustion and lethargy that the holiday season seems to spread in our culture in order to stay awake to what is most essential and God-filled in our lives for the sake of the world's becoming in God?