

## SOMETHING TO DO WHILE WE'RE WAITING

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Zephaniah 3:14-20

Mark 13:24-37

Every year in mid-to-late November, those who are hardy enough, or interested enough, or committed enough to arise in the wee hours of the morning are treated to a display of falling stars as the planet earth passes through the Leonids—celestial dust left behind by the Temple-Tuttle comet which circles the sun every 32.9 years. Most years shooting stars of the Leonids can be observed at a rate of 30-40 per hour, but some years are much more spectacular. In 1966, for example, astronomers recorded over 100,000 meteors per hour.

Abraham Lincoln was 24 years old and boarding at the home of a Presbyterian deacon in New Salem in 1833. He retold his experience the night of the famed Leonid Meteor Storm years later, to a group of bankers who were worried about the stability of the Union. Lincoln told the assembled bankers:

*One night I was roused from my sleep by a rap on the door and I heard the deacon's voice exclaiming, "Arise, Abraham, the day of judgment has come!" I sprang from my bed and rushed to the window and saw the stars falling in great showers!*

*But looking back of them in the heavens I saw all the grand, old constellations with which I was so well acquainted, fixed and true in their places, and I told the deacon not to worry. We would live to see another day.*

One could easily speculate that "the deacon" had these words of Jesus in mind when he roused Lincoln from his slumber:

*"But in those days, following that distress,*

*"the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
<sup>25</sup> the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'*

Christ did not return in all his glory to judge and rule the nations that night in 1833, nor any of the other times in the last 2,000 years that someone, or a group of someones, thought they clearly read the signs and “knew” the time had arrived and Jesus was coming in on the next cloud. In fact, to know would be in polar opposition to the point Jesus was trying to make in the verses immediately following:

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”<sup>33</sup> Be on guard! Be alert! **You do not know when that time will come.***

Advent is a weird time. During the four weeks before Christmas, we anticipate, remember and prepare for Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. But we know that already happened, and that we reap the benefits of Christ-With-Us each and every day, so to say we are “preparing” can seem a little artificial, maybe?

Did you know that, according to Christianity.com, Advent was originally a time of penance as folks new to the faith prepared to be baptized on Epiphany—January 6? This was in Spain and Gaul during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, however, Roman Christians had tied Advent to the coming of Christ. But this “coming” they had in mind was not Christ’s first coming in the manger in Bethlehem, but his 2<sup>nd</sup> coming in the clouds as the judge of the world. It wasn’t until the Middle Ages that the Advent season was explicitly linked to Christ’s first coming at Christmas.

Today’s church anticipates Christ’s arrival in three ways during the season of Advent:

1. The inaugural birth of Jesus as a babe in Bethlehem, i.e. “The first Christmas”
2. Jesus’ return in glory when the Kingdom of God is fully realized
3. Jesus’ presence with us in our lives each and every day

In reference to the past and future natures of Advent, Karl Barth writes:

*Unfulfilled and fulfilled promise are related to each other, as are dawn and sunrise. Both promise and (are) in fact the same promise. If anywhere at all, that is precisely in the light of the coming Christ that faith has become Advent faith, the expectation of future revelation. But faith knows for whom*

*and for what it is waiting. It is fulfilled faith because it lays hold on the fulfilled promise.*

Today's passage from Mark's Gospel is a portion of what scholars refer to as "The little apocalypse." It puts us in the presence of the adult Jesus offering both prophetic judgment and prophetic comfort. He anticipates the end times when heaven will literally quake and stars will begin to fall out of the sky. What sounds like a disaster, however, actually prepares the way for the "Son of Man" and his gathering of the elect. This text follows the advice of epic movie director Cecil B. De Mille:

*"Start with an earthquake, then build to a climax."*

Certainly, from the very first word, there can be no doubt that there is much at stake in this season, and in the very beginning of this story we are given a glimpse of its ending.

It can seem strange, at first, to be exhorted to wait for his coming again when, in the context of the liturgical year, we are still awaiting his birth. In one important respect, however, it is entirely fitting, because it places us squarely with those who awaited the birth of the Messiah. Neither those who awaited the first coming of the Messiah, nor those who now await his return, know when he will appear.

In other respects, our contemporary anticipation of the coming of God's Promised One at Christmas is quite different from the experience of those who awaited the Messiah. After all, we know for whom we are waiting. We know the day he will arrive. It is circled in red on our calendars. We have Advent calendars and Advent candles and a Schell Brothers billboard on Rt. 1 to help us count down to the promised day.

Frank and I went to see Clearspace's production of *A Christmas Story: The Musical* recently. Based on the popular 1983 movie, the play follows the exploits of Ralphie, his friends and family, during the 4 weeks before Christmas, 1940. Ralphie wants nothing more than to find a Red Ryder BB gun under the tree on Christmas morning. He tries with all of his might to convince "the powers that be"—his parents, his teacher and Santa—that a Red Ryder BB gun with a compass and "a thing that tells time" is the perfect gift. Throughout the play, Ralphie counts down the days until Christmas, getting more and more panicked as each attempt to insure the

fulfillment of his heart's desire is thwarted with the words, "You'll shoot your eye out!"—Four more weeks; two more weeks; two more days...

In contrast to Ralphie and to us, those who lived before the birth of Jesus did not know the day or the hour of his arrival, so they needed to live in a continual state of watchfulness. The birth of the Messiah could only be celebrated as a surprise party that could take place on any day, at any moment. By anticipating the return of the Son of Man here, throughout Advent, we wait in the same way those who lived before Jesus was born waited, not knowing the day or the hour when the Messiah will appear. We also join them in hearing—and needing—the same exhortation to be watchful and to keep awake.

There is a difference between waiting for Christmas and waiting for Christ. We know when Christmas will arrive, and what it will be like when it does (most likely—unless the neighbors' unruly dogs steal and eat the turkey). We know the script, and all we need do is follow it. But waiting for Christ to come—or to come again—requires something more, an expectant watchfulness, because we never know when he will appear.

This requires from us a different kind of waiting. Some waiting is passive. But there is also active waiting. A girl who stands on a street corner waiting for the bus to arrive will experience one kind of waiting, a passive waiting. The same girl on the same corner hearing the sound of a parade that is just out of sight will also wait, but it will be a different kind of waiting, full of expectation, a waiting on tiptoe, an active waiting.

A fisherman finds it burdensome to wait for spring to arrive because it is a passive waiting. Once he is fishing, however, he does not find it a burden to wait for the trout to rise to his fly because it is an active kind of waiting, full of expectation. At the pool of his favorite trout stream his waiting is filled with accomplishing all the many things he must do, all injected with an active sense of anticipation because he never knows when the trout may appear. That is the kind of active waiting Jesus had in mind when he enjoined his followers, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

Martin B. Copenhaver writes:

*It is clear that Jesus does not intend for us to predict when he will return. Rather, he is urging us to live as if his return were just around the corner.*

*There is no time to nod off in a waiting room. Rather, we are to be more like a waiter who is continually busy in serving others and so has no time to sit down and count the tips.*

Mr. Rogers wrote a song which he sang with his television audience of young children, the first line of which said, “Let’s think of something to do while we’re waiting, while we’re waiting for something new to do.”

Living in faith and service to others is what Jesus calls us to do “while we’re waiting for something new,” during this holy season of Advent and throughout the year. He calls us to share the Good News of Emmanuel—God with us—in word and action, attitude and gratitude, anticipation and fulfillment of God’s promise.

At the same time, we are to be attuned to the signs of Christ’s rule around us, because, indeed, he has already arrived. As I said, Advent is a weird time. We’ve entered into one of the most important paradoxes of the gospel; the “already/not yet” quality to this portion of the divine drama in which we live. Already Jesus has established the means through which we are drawn into relationship with God, but not yet do we live in complete communion with God. Already the realm of God is evident, but not yet is that realm fully established.

We live in the meantime—the challenging meantime between the “already” and the “not yet.” By keeping alert and awake, by living our lives in accord with the One who has already come, died, and been raised, not only will we be prepared to live in the promised realm of God when it comes, but we may experience even now some of what life in that realm will be like.

Amen.