

When God Fails Our Expectations

From the Series: Good News Then and Now

Text: Isaiah 2:4; Matthew 24:34; II Peter 3:4

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I inaugurate a new series of messages today that will take us to the end of October and Reformation Sunday, the day we remember the major event in Christian history when the Protestant tradition emerged out of the Roman Catholic tradition in the 16th century. That Protestant tradition in its Reformed expression is my background and the tradition in which this congregation was founded in 1870. It is the tradition of a majority of this congregation still, I believe, although I suspect over the last decade or more we have received in membership more folks from the Roman Catholic tradition than from any other.

It seems to me that the idea of reformation is an important idea to keep before us on the threshold of the 21st century and the Third Millennium, and I am hoping that this Reformation celebration will be our most significant ever because we will have traced the Christian faith development through 2000 years. On the heels of Reformation, we will have the Jewish scholar on Christian origins, Amy-Jill Levine, here for the weekend, speaking here on Sunday, November 7, and then Bishop John Shelby Spong on November 12-14, speaking on "Why Christianity Must Change or Die." That should prepare us for an informed and intelligent movement into the new millennium.

In order to prepare the congregation for this experience, I will in this series go back not to the 16th century, but to the first and second centuries of the Common Era and trace the development of the Christian faith story over 2000 years. My first choice for series title was, "Christian Faith and the Climate of Opinion: A Two Millennia Retrospective." The Team cried, "No way! No one will come!" Then I came up with what I thought was really fascinating and even a bit poetic: "When Symbols Break and Myths Dissolve." The verdict - "Scary."

So, finally, bowing to pressure of those who hope to keep this place alive, I entitled the series, "Good News Then and Now," meaning thereby what I've meant all along –

that the Gospel - the good news - has continued to be proclaimed in every succeeding age in changing expression reflecting the historical context into which it is spoken.

My purpose must be obvious; I believe we must find a fresh translation of the good news for the day in which we are living. We all know this happened in the 16th century when the Western Roman Catholic Church was rent and Protestantism emerged, but I hope to enable you to see that, although that was perhaps the most dramatic and certainly the shift that has most impacted us in Western Christendom, it was but one instance of what has been happening for 2000 years, although not always with such major institutional repercussions.

This is important for this congregation to realize because *we are endeavoring to find the medium and the message that will bring good news to our community and our world at the turn of the millennium.*

The Gospel means *good news* - good - that is, encouraging, hopeful, life enhancing. *News* - that means updated, fresh, for now. Thus, *Good News then* - in the first and fourth and 12th and 16th centuries and all points in between, *Good News now*: How do we bring a helpful, hopeful, encouraging word to our moment on the timeline of history?

It is my sense that if we are going to feel the freedom to re-imagine the faith and do it with passion and seriousness, we must realize that *we stand in a line of those who have wrestled with the faith*, have come into times that called for fresh insight on the emerging human experience, on the unfolding drama we call history. *As the human situation changes, faith formulations must address new circumstances and new human experiences.* I have hammered away at this until you perhaps tire of hearing it. But, I am now embarking on a rather ambitious undertaking: to lay the foundation for the perspectives we share here.

I suppose one might say this is an apology for my ministry and for the posture of this congregation, providing historical justification for daring boldly to revision and re-imagine the faith.

One more word - my purpose is not to provide an academic lecture series; this is worship and the sermon should have practical, spiritual import for the life of the congregation. In the significant shifts through 2000 years, behind the shifts have always been *existential concern - faith matters that matter for living.* Thus, today my sermon is "When God Fails Our Expectations."

I think that expresses the experience of the early Church as the Apostolic generation was dying off. The whole Jesus movement was posited on the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ from heaven. They held to the conviction that Jesus who was crucified was risen from the dead, ascended into heaven and was soon to return to judge the living and the dead.

Imminence was the operative word - Jesus would come a second time soon. The New Testament references are too numerous to cite. Let me simply remind you of the final words of the Revelation of Jesus to John just prior to the final benediction: "Surely I am coming soon."

Paul in I Corinthians 15:51, "We will not all die, but we will all be changed." In I Thessalonians 4:13f, "... then we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord ..."

And, of course, from the Gospel reading, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place ..." Matthew 24:34.

Let me say here that some of the Jesus scholars today attribute these apocalyptic passages to the early Jesus community - not to Jesus himself. That is currently a rigorous debate. But no matter; my point is that this was the expectation of the Jesus movement in the wake of his life and death.

And Jesus did not return. That was the first major crisis of faith of the Jesus movement - or as it came to be known - the Christian Church. It takes little thought or reflection to realize how traumatic was the delay of the *parousia*, as this fact is spoken of. *Parousia* is a Greek term for coming, advent. The "delay" points to the early sense that surely he is coming, coming soon, but obviously not as soon as we expected. There has been a delay.

Now, if this was at the heart and center of the early Church's hope and expectation, waiting for the glorious appearance of the Lord from glory, then non-appearance, at first spoken of as delay, created some urgent questions - about loved ones who died in the meantime, for example, would they miss out? But, for the most part, faith held on. But, when the whole Apostolic generation died, which was to be the terminal generation, the crisis deepened.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that those who died would be included with those who are alive at the Lord's coming, but eventually they all died. Now, wide-scale defection began and the faith of many was put on the defensive. This is the situation we find in the Second Letter of Peter which was not written by the Apostle Peter, but is best dated after 90 CE and perhaps as late as about 150 CE, that is, 70 to 120 years after the death of Jesus.

That a crisis exists we can read from II Peter 3:3ff, "... in the last days scoffers will come. They will ask mockingly, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'" In other words, the believers were taunted with the fact that it was "business as usual" in the world. Nothing happened. What, then, of the claims of the risen, ascended Lord coming in glory and power to judge the world?

It is obvious that the delay of the Lord's appearing must have created an extremely difficult situation for the early Christian movement. That movement was composed of two distinct groups - the Jewish Christian community located largely in Palestine and the Gentile Christian community, the result of Paul's mission. These two groups had sharp differences. New Testament study sees Luke's writing in Acts as an attempt to show how these two were reconciled, but there was a sharp division. Yet, both groups held essentially to the apocalyptic hope that was rooted in Jewish apocalypticism that was anticipating the end of the age, and both saw the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of the End, which would be consummated with his return from heaven to judge the living and the dead.

The imminent return of Jesus did not happen and that significant fact necessitated a major transformation of Christian understanding.

It was Albert Schweitzer who called biblical scholarship and theological inquiry to the recognition of the fact that there occurred in the immediate past Apostolic period a transformation of understanding of the Gospel. The transformation moved the early Christian movement to what is called *early Catholicism*. That, in fact, was a move not only to create a new understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but also toward the *creation of the Christian Church as an institution, a regularizing of the faith, mode of worship (liturgy, sacrament) and structure of the Church. This was the beginning of doctrinal formulation and the formulation of orthodoxy.*

It was not a simple process. There were strenuous battles fought over the right interpretation of the Gospel and it did not happen smoothly or at all places at the same time. There were now groups and views designated as heretical and after a long, tortuous process there emerged what was designated the *regula Fidei*, the Order of the Faith. In the process, Jewish Christianity was reduced to a sect and eventually faded from the scene and St. Paul's theological understanding was transformed into the faith of the early Catholic Church.

It is not possible for me in the sermon format to document this or set forth the conflicting path by which it was accomplished. Perhaps, however, you can sense what was happening if I describe the whole movement as *the eschatology of the Apostolic faith*. This must be plain to see, for the problem was the imminent return of Jesus which did not happen.

Eschatology is the teaching about the last things, the end of history. It derives from *Eschaton*, a Greek word meaning "End." In sum, *the post-Apostolic movement had to create a new scenario - a scenario which took into account ongoing history and the living of life in the world which obviously did not pass away.*

This was the first and major shift in understanding made imperative for the Christian movement by the delay of the *parousia*. In his *Formation of Christian Dogma*, Martin Werner, a Swiss historian of dogma, taking his cue from Schweitzer and others, claims this was the womb out of which all Christian dogmatics must be understood.

So what?

Remember, my purpose in this series, to demonstrate that the point in history at which we have arrived as the third millennium dawns calls us to revision and re-imagine the faith, in continuity with the tradition but in fresh expression which takes account of the new world which is our historical context, and that need not cause fear or anxiety because this kind of development has been going on from the very beginning.

The second letter of Peter was a plea not to yield to the inevitable. Those who realized that Jesus' return was delayed were not all scoffers, although I am sure some were. There were also those who took up the challenge to try to make sense of the Gospel in new historical circumstances. The author of our text was an early fundamentalist, pleading yesterday's answers to today's questions.

I find it fascinating that that writer still has voices crying the same thing. Two thousand years later there are those claiming the days are counting down. In Grand Rapids, as reported in the *Press* yesterday, the TV evangelist John Hagee signed his most recent book. He was pictured with a considerable article. The new title is *From Daniel to Doomsday: The Countdown Has Begun*, and Hagee claims he is speaking the Gospel and telling people what the Bible says about the "terminal generation." That is remarkable. That is precisely what St. Paul thought he was doing. It was precisely the fact that the Apostolic generation was not the terminal generation that created the crisis that necessitated the major revisioning of the faith that led to the development of early Catholic tradition.

This week I viewed a catalogue from Christian Book Distributors. On the back cover is advertised the novel series *Left Behind*, by Tim La Haye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Six volumes out. Millions of copies sold. You can get all six at the bookstore for \$134.92 or discounted from CBD for \$88.50. The same catalogue has a centerfold advertising seven titles on Y2K, titles such as *The Road to Armagedon* and *Jesus' Final Warning*. And, of course, there are t-shirts emblazoned with such slogans as "Don't Be Left Behind," and "Trib Force."

The lack of taste is one thing. The economic exploitation is another. But, the abysmal ignorance of such guilt-imputing, fear-inciting abuse of the Bible is simply incredible. My pastoral concern rises from the damage such misuse of the Bible and ignorance of the development of theological understanding creates. The biblical story tells of the God Who has created all, sustains all, and embraces all - full of grace with the purpose of love. It is Good News. It was Good News then,

when Paul was overwhelmed by the grace of God and the hope that appeared in Jesus. It is Good News now, recognizing Paul's misconstruing of history, but recognizing, as well, his marvelous sense of being in Christ, in grace.

If we can see through the limitations of Paul's knowledge of the created order, beyond his limited understanding of world history, human development and the ongoing evolutionary unfolding of reality, *we can still hear his witness to the God Who in Jesus drew near, was embodied, and Who invites us to trust, to rest, and to continue the 2000-year process of updating the Good News.*

It was not easy to realize that Jesus was not imminently returning. It was a curse. Many lost their grip, gave up, sought another way. That is part of being human. *It felt like God failed their expectations.*

That happens to us, too, when we use God as a magic genie to protect us or secure for us some favor, when we make God too small, a "fix it" person keeping us from harm's way, free from the tragedy and suffering that is part of our human lot. But that is to use God, and such a God sometimes will fail our expectations - our prayers will be to no avail.

The problem, of course, is not God, but our expectations. *God calls us to maturity, to responsibility, to the way of Jesus, to the life of compassion and community and, in all of that, God is Emmanuel - God with us, today and always.*