

Spirit: The Now of the Future

From the series: The Presence of the Future

Text: Isaiah 61:1; John 14:18-19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We had our first Advent Midweek Eucharist on Wednesday. It is such a lovely hour - the warmth of the Parlour beautifully decorated in the festive garb of the Christmas season, the intimate setting - there is something quite wonderful about it. I hope the secret doesn't get out, because about 75 is all that we can comfortably handle.

Well, Wednesday I had a rather startling revelation for those gathered - I told them *Jesus is not coming again*, which, of course, is the theme of Advent - The one who came a babe in human flesh, will come again in glory to judge and rule.

I just came out with it; the early followers of Jesus, including Paul, expected Jesus to return in power and glory to bring history to its close and usher in the age to come. They got it wrong; the ongoing unfolding drama of history and human culture should surely tip us off - 2000 years of subsequent history and we still hear talk of the Second Coming of our Lord from Glory.

Let me suggest in this season of Advent 1998, that it is time for us to take a sober look at the biblical time line - the divine calendar as it has been understood and declared over the centuries, and recognize that it really makes no sense of the reality we live, the cosmic unfolding, history developing, and the emerging of humankind.

I have been thinking about this for a few years now. When I was in Europe in the 60s, there was a circle of young scholars who were swinging the pendulum back to an appreciation of God's action within our history. It gave me a way to return here and preach good news.

One European biblical scholar, Oscar Cullman, was not of that circle, but he had written a very influential book entitled *Christ and Time*. He pointed out what may seem obvious to one familiar with the Bible story - that the whole biblical drama was seen on a time line. Out of eternity issues the creative word, "Let there be" and the cosmos is formed, and time and history began - a time still ongoing in

the biblical drama. The biblical understanding was that those who were living the drama were in what they called "this age" or "the present age." But, they were looking for "The Age to Come." The whole Creation/historical drama was seen under that model or paradigm.

This age and the Age to Come. The Hebrew prophets longed for the Age to Come - on earth in history when Shalom would everywhere prevail. Then the fortunes of Judah reversed - they returned from Babylonian Exile, but never saw the glory return. They were the pawns of conquering powers, poor, oppressed, and without hope. For them, history was hopeless; they cried out to their God to intervene, to dash the wicked and vindicate them as God's chosen.

This was a move from the prophetic with its dream of Shalom to Apocalyptic - the longing for God to ring down the curtain on history and usher in the Age to Come.

This is the setting of the time of Jesus. I suspect Jesus shared that longing, although that is a matter of debate. But, certainly St. Paul was looking for the return of Jesus who had been crucified, risen, and ascended to the throne of God. That was the picture: Jesus at the right hand of God ruling from heaven and soon to come again - this time not in human weakness, but in Divine Power.

In Revelation, we hear the cry of that early church, "Maranatha," which, translated, is "Our Lord, Come," and we hear the ascended Lord declare, "I am coming soon." In the calendar of the church this cry of 2000 years is remembered with every returning Advent - The one who came is coming again. And there has never lacked Christian groups that have continued to affirm: He is coming soon! It is quite amazing that such a conception, such a hope could be sustained for 2000 years.

Well, as I said, in Wednesday's meditation I said quite simply, "He is not coming again." I say it that bluntly to catch your attention because I want you to hear what I am saying and I finally say it now because we are on *the threshold of the Third Millennium*. As the calendar moved toward 1000, there was a large scale stirring and disturbance. Expectation was aroused and many claimed they were at the end of the age. I am beginning to hear it now again as though the turn of the calendar will bring us to the end and the appearing of our Lord in glory for judgment and the final consummation of all things.

My word to you is, "Don't believe it, don't get worked up about it, don't be afraid."

The Jesus who came is not coming again in the sense that is understood in the biblical story.

Now if you have heard that rather bold denial, I hope you will be ready to hear an *alternative declaration* - *Jesus who came, the word made flesh, the one in whom God was embodied, has already come again - again and again and again.*

Let me give you the text that says this very clearly. In John's Gospel, Jesus is purported to say: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." (14:18) Just prior to this promise, Jesus promises the gift of the Spirit, the Spirit of truth.

It is significant that this Gospel is late, probably in the 90s of that first century. Jesus had not returned on the clouds. Many of the Jews who had been part of the movement were returning to their Jewish spiritual home in the Synagogue. The Pharisaic Rabbinic movement was proving to be the ongoing shape of Jewish faith. As that movement gained power, there was an edict passed that said if one confessed Jesus as God's Messiah, that one would be put out of the Synagogue. And so, it was decision time - continue to confess Jesus Messiah and be put out of the community, or give up that confession and continue in the Jewish community and tradition.

That is always a crisis of great import. And what was no doubt *the deciding factor*?

Jesus did not return.

It is easy to understand that the early community expected a literal return of the ascended Lord from the throne of God. Jesus was a flesh and blood human being. Jesus lived, taught, healed, was killed - all the hard facts of historical existence. And they sensed his presence still - thus the resurrection claim - this one who died lives. God raised him up and took him "up." Why wouldn't they expect him to come back in literal fashion?

Read *Acts 1:11*. The scene is Jesus' ascent into heaven. The disciples look on amazed. An angel appears and says to them:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

There you have it; it could not be plainer. Decades after the actual life and death of Jesus, that is how they told the story and expressed their hope and expectation.

But, now John is writing even later. Now it is decision time - to remain in the Jewish Synagogue and faith tradition, or, to persist in the faith that Jesus was the Messiah who would soon return to bring the Age to an end and usher in the Age to Come.

But, he didn't come. And he still didn't come. *Nothing happened.*

Now, what is the Gospel writer to say? Will he say, "Hold on; he's coming!"

The author of II Peter did. He wrote, " ... in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, 'Where is the promise of his

coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’ ... with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day ... The day will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” (II Peter 3:1-13)

But, the author of the fourth Gospel did not simply plead with the Jesus movement to hold on because surely he was coming soon. Rather, in the Gospel of John, we see a significant shift from the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus to a present experience of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ - the Spirit is variously designated in the New Testament.

He came: John says the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. This was the literal, historical presence of God in human form. And, crucified, resurrected and returned to the presence of God he comes again - not in human historical form this time; not in visible display of signs and wonder. No. Rather, he comes in Spirit, the spiritual presence of God abiding in the life of the one who believed and in the community that believes that he was the embodiment of God in the days of his flesh.

The English biblical scholar, C. H. Dodd, whose special expertise was the Gospel of John, coined a phrase to point up this shift. He called John’s revision “*Realized Eschatology*.”

Eschaton is the Greek word for the end and Eschatology, the teaching about the end of history. Dodd, on the basis of the Fourth Gospel, claimed that the end had already occurred. The New Age Jesus ushered in was the Age of the Spirit. He understood the Fourth Gospel to be a dismantling of the future expectation and the declaration of the New Age in the Spirit.

Although he was not widely followed in this claim, his point of the significant shift in focus has been acknowledged. *This shift is pointed to in the Advent theme “The Presence of the Future.”*

For our present experience the future is not future, but present. I mean, in our human, historical experience, we have the presence of the Presence of God, the God enfleshed in Jesus, given us in the Spirit. Thus my title - *Spirit: The Now of the Future*.

What I am suggesting is thus a shift from the commonly held assumption about the biblical teaching about the end of history. That biblical view is most commonly designated by the phrase “Second Coming.” What I am suggesting is not without biblical basis, however. What we see with the New Testament itself is a shifting. There is no one consistent biblical scheme. I am picking up the hint from the fourth Gospel that we need to find another way to understand our ongoing historical experience that keeps moving into an uncharted future. We

must have a fresh sense of the meaning of a key conviction of the Hebrew prophets and the Christmas story - the conviction contained in the name *Emmanuel*, God with us.

God with us; the Spirit with us; the Presence present to us; the Mystery once enfleshed, but always the enlivening, creative Presence in the whole cosmic drama, the whole unfolding story we call history.

In the beginning the Spirit hovered over the created Chaos.

In Israel's life, the prophet cried, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ..."

The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you ..."

On the Day of Pentecost, suddenly "... from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind ... all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit."

Through two millennia, the church has confessed "... Conceived by the Holy Spirit."

Spirit: the Now of the Future. Spirit - God's breath, in creation of cosmos and unfolding of history - the life, the creative, energizing Presence that in the evolving of Nature finally brought to emergence a creature conscious, aware, giving the whole amazing Reality a voice full of wonder.

The biblical story was clear that Creation or Nature stemmed from God's creative word, but it was in history that Israel heard God's voice. They divorced themselves from Nature in repudiation of the Canaanite religion that was bound to the cyclic natural order with the seasons coming round in regular order. And there was great gain in that exalted view of the Creator who spoke reality into existence and was a living, active presence in the historical unfolding. History is where Israel encountered God, or better, was encountered by God.

Thus, that the Word became flesh was an amazing claim. Spirit, the instrument of creating, creates a human being who was the Mystery embodied. And is it any wonder that such a sense of Reality should then look for this embodied one to return to bring history to its consummation?

But, we no longer divorce history from Nature. Rather, we see one grand process from the cosmic explosion 15 billion years ago, to the present continuing evolving of Nature which has gained a sense of history because we have emerged who are conscious, aware, recognizing the unfolding.

There is not Nature and history. Rather, Nature has a history.

And that created Reality we call Nature is alive, evolving because it is permeated with a creative Spirit that gives life and nudges the whole process on.

Not some dramatic, cataclysmic future event, some display of power and glory. No. Rather, the future is already present in the Spirit Who mediates to us the Presence of the Mystery - Emmanuel, God with us.

That was the prophetic assurance to Israel in its dark moments of crisis. Emmanuel: God with us. That was what the early Jesus movement experienced. Emmanuel: God with us - now in human flesh.

And the Revelation's final vision, chapter 21:3, reads in some manuscripts:

God-with-them shall himself be their God

in the context where the great declaration is uttered,

Now at last God has his dwelling among humankind.

There you have, of course, a climax in some near future. That, I am saying, needs revision.

But, what is claimed for that future consummation is the same claim made by Isaiah, by Matthew. The claim is Emmanuel - God with us. That is the Now of the Future.

The implication of that claim changes our whole perspective on our place in the cosmos. Rather than those who sing mournfully, "this world is not my home, I'm just passing through," that is, I'm heaven bound, longing to divest myself of this life, this world which is a vale of tears, we celebrate the wonder of the natural world - the whole creation so richly endowed that there has emerged creatures conscious, aware, with tongues to praise, with spirit to love and care, with vision full of hope.

Where is the whole dramatic venture going? Who knows? The future is open. But, what will be true, we can be sure, is that the key to it all will ever be Emmanuel - God with us - Spirit creating, moving, and the whole story unfolding. Thus, we wait not with anxious expectation for suns darkened, stars falling, and all hell erupting. Rather, we live now with eyes open, ears cocked, imagination full of dreams and visions in this present moment, marked by the deep trust that God is with us, alert to the ongoing drama, watching with wonder and awe.

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