

Paul: Simply Wrong About History

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Text: I Thessalonians 4:16-17; I Corinthians 15:22-24

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Nancy and I have finally succeeded in securing our future just in case Jesus doesn't come in the year 2000. We consolidated our pension funds. We have a very fine financial advisor who lives in New Jersey and we're so very happy with him. Michael is not only competent and honest, but he is also a committed churchman, a Christian, who seems to have a real personal concern for us, and he comes through once or twice a year to hold our hand and say, "All will be well."

Michael came through this week. He is just finishing a term as Moderator of a large Presbytery in New Jersey, and so he's really interested in the Church and he has been interested in Christ Community and in case anybody is at all interested, I have a dozen or two tapes I have at all times at the ready. (Silver and gold have I none, but sermons I have aplenty). And so, I share these around; they grow legs and crawl all over the globe. He must have gotten a tape from Advent, this past Advent when I announced rather boldly in the season in which we celebrate the fact that Jesus came and is coming again, that Jesus wasn't coming. Remember that? Jesus isn't coming again. Michael said he was listening to that as he was driving along on the New Jersey Turnpike and he almost ran off the road. He said to me, "Could you get me a printed copy? I'd like to study that." And he sort of still had a dazed look.

Well, what I'd like to do today is to say that Jesus is not coming again and the reason we've been confused about that for so long is that Paul had it all wrong. Paul was wrong about history. Paul was wrong about history in terms of the time line, where he thought he was in the time line of universal history, and that caused him to be wrong about the meaning and significance of world history. Now, I understand it's a bit presumptuous to take on the great Apostle, but hear me out this morning. Paul was obviously wrong about the time line. I have said that here for a long time. I mean, you can't deny that. Paul had it wrong about where things were in the whole cosmic journey. Paul didn't even grasp, through no fault of his, but simply that the information was not available about the whole nature of the unfolding of the cosmos and billions of years and this bio-historical-evolutionary trajectory on which we find ourselves. Paul thought that the End

was very near, the end of his world as he knew it, the world as it was organized at his time. He thought the End had come, and he believed that in the death and resurrection of Jesus the climax had been reached and all that was left now was a brief interregnum, that is, a brief interim period in which Jesus was reigning from heaven, soon to return and bring all things to their consummation.

Now, as I said, I have said for a long time here that Paul had that wrong. That's obvious. Paul said Jesus was coming soon. Jesus hasn't come yet. You can't very well get the Apostle off the hook on that. He expected the imminent return of Jesus to wrap up all things, and that's obvious in the readings of this morning.

The first kind of labored paragraph that I read beginning with verse 12 shows that in Paul's mind there was an intimate connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the general resurrection. If one didn't happen, the other wouldn't happen. If one happened, the other would happen, and they were intimately connected, and in order to maintain that intimate connection, even though Jesus was resurrected and glorified and the rest hadn't happened, Paul used the figure of speech, the "first fruits." Jesus was the first fruit of those who would rise, but the first fruit, you know, is the first ear of corn that is ripe, the first tassel of oats that is ripe, the first apple, the first strawberry, that is the first fruits. You say, "Ah, we got one ripe." But, the first one ripe doesn't precede the rest by very long or you have a problem, and when there is a hiatus between the first one ripe and the rest, something is out of kilter. That was the image that Paul was using - Christ the first fruits, and then the rest at his coming, and his coming has to be rather soon in order for him even to conceive of first fruits, and he had to conceive of it that way because there was an intimate connection between the resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection, in Paul's thinking.

Paul goes on, then, to give us the scenario of the End in his understanding at that time, for Christ is presently reigning, subduing all contrary powers after which he will yield up the kingdom to the Father in order that God may be all in all. All of that, obviously, is to happen in relatively short order. Jesus will return after he has subdued all contrary power. The dead in Christ will rise, and he will turn it all over to God, big "G."

That he believed that and that he preached that is obvious from his letter to the Thessalonians. He went there, founded a congregation, then kept in touch with them, as he did with the congregations he had founded, dealing with the problems that cropped up, and at Thessalonica, the problem that cropped up was that he had taught them so well that Jesus had come, died, was resurrected in order to give them eternal life, and would soon return, that they got up every morning and said, "Maybe today is the day," and they looked skyward hoping there would be a rift in the sky and the appearance of the Son of Man on clouds. Then, a loved one died, and then another loved one died, and they began to look at each other and ask, "Will our loved ones who died before the grand event miss out?"

So, Paul said, "I write these things to you that you grieve not as those who have no hope, for if we believe that those who fall asleep in Jesus God will bring with him," and then he gets into the apocalyptic imagery of the trumpet and the angel and then we who are alive at the time, Paul expecting still to be a part of that company who would be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, who has brought with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus before the grand event, and so he says the only thing that's really important in that paragraph, "We will be forever with the Lord. Comfort one another with these words." He was dealing with a very concrete, pastoral problem that was precipitated by his preaching of the imminent coming of Jesus who didn't come soon enough in order to get there before Aunt Bessie died.

Obviously, this is what Paul believed. This is what he proclaimed, and he was wrong. He was wrong about the time line of history. And being wrong about the time line of history, which is beyond refute, he gives us a distorted sense of the significance of history, of our present experience, of our human experience, of our ordinary experience before the face of God, and I think that you will see that quite readily when you will remember that Paul was obviously in the apocalyptic mode and the shorthand for explaining that is simply to say that Paul was a throwback to John the Baptist. We've looked at that, time and again here, most recently in our Lenten series where we saw how Jesus distanced himself from John the Baptist because John the Baptist was calling down fire and judgment from heaven and the outpouring of the wrath of God and the vengeance of God on all that was evil and in opposition to God, as well as the salvation of the chosen. John participated in the very widespread and pervasive apocalyptic expectation of his day, and so did Paul. If we had time, we could read on in the second chapter of Thessalonians, and you would see all of the apocalyptic imagery is there, including the vengeance of God. Paul is talking now about the vengeance of God being poured out at the coming of Jesus from heaven who has been received into heaven for this little brief period of time.

Paul was apocalyptic, and apocalypticism was in the air between 200 before Christ to 100 after Christ. During that whole 300-year period, Jewish thought was permeated with apocalyptic expectation; it was in the air. John the Baptist was the one who was waiting for God to do something, and Paul knew that God had done something but hadn't finished it yet and would soon take care of the rest, bringing all things to consummation - God's vengeance on the unbeliever, God's chosen justified.

Thus for Paul and his contemporaries, life between Jesus' ascension and his coming again was an interim. They were cooling their heels and waiting for the end to come. To Corinth he writes,

... the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not

rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. I Corinthians 7:29-31

So, sit loosely, don't get encumbered. That was counsel for an interim, temporary experience and that must be a limited, less than normal kind of human existence. Paul was quite uninterested in everyday ordinary human life.

And Paul was not really interested in the life of the historical Jesus. Once he says we knew him after the flesh, but we know him thus no more. The reigning Christ about to return was Paul's total focus. Jesus' life and concrete existence played no part.

Now, this is the opposite of the case with the Gospels. There God's salvation is embodied in a very real human life. Incarnation is key and the historical Jesus is concerned about very concrete human life, about justice and mercy, about table fellowship and healing of the body - in a word, about transforming the human situation dominated by power issuing in violence.

For Paul, the present was a time of feverish activity - proclaiming the Gospel, calling to repentance, getting as many into the number of the saved as possible before the end arrived.

Now to make Paul's understanding of the time between the two comings normative would miss the meaning and significance of human existence and human history which comes to expression much better in the life of Jesus, where we claim the eternal God was embodied, incarnate.

What's an alternative to Paul's missed reading of the times, which led to a misunderstanding of the nature of things? Well, the alternative, I think, is what we see currently in the research on the historical Jesus. Dominic Crossan introduced us to a Jesus whose life was a non-violent protest in the name of the God of justice. The Jesus who distanced himself from John the Baptist who had said, "God can't you do something," and Jesus rather representing a God Who said, "Why don't *you* do something?" The difference is a God in the face of Jesus, as Marcus Borg will speak of Jesus, a Spirit person, concretely in human existence, healing and embracing. I mean, you have to sense that this is so. Obviously, if the curtain of history is going to ring down very soon, as Paul thought, then you adjust your life one way. You certainly don't celebrate birthdays. No need to plant a seedling or to clean up a river. I suppose you might celebrate flowers, but you'd see a cut flower as a symbol of everything that was soon to wither away.

The alternative would be to see that God is to be known and served and worshiped in this life, that it is not "out there," but right here and right now that I am to live before the face of God, that it is here and now that I am to find

meaning for my human existence, that it is here and now that I am to be the continuing embodying of the Spirit of God as was uniquely embodied in Jesus. It makes all the difference in the world how I look at my world, how I meet my day, how I live my life, whether I think that I have to simply endure and hold on until ..., or whether I recognize that this is the place, for God's sake, where God has placed me to live before the face of god, to love justice, kindness, walk humbly with my God, embrace my neighbor and to find meaning and significance in my ordinary days.

"Ah," you say, "this world? This life? What of shootings and violence in Colorado? What of bombings in Kosovo and Belgrade? What of the constant eruption of evil and darkness? *This* world is that to which you would point us for meaning and significance and communion with God?"

I would say, "Yes," for this life is not only violence and darkness. It is also a marvelous spring morning in which there are blossoms with the prodigality of color to delight the eye. It is also a world of an Olivia and Alexandra, beautiful creatures, children who smile, as well as dirty diapers. It is also a world in which one can look into the eyes of another and say, 'I love you.' It is a world that has all the potential to self-destruct and lie in ruins, or a world that has all the possibility of being a human community, a family where hands are joined and hearts entwined and peace reigns.

NATO at fifty? Bombing, but bombing in order to say "No" to an inhumane monstrosity because we have come to see that we cannot stand by and allow that to be. Haclav Havel, addressing the NATO leaders, said, "Peace is something which we must be willing to defend."

I can understand the temptation to cry: "God, can't you do something? Take me out of here!"

The answer is "No, I have put it in your hands. *You* do something."

Paul was wrong in the time line. He is not a prophetic voice to follow in wringing the best out of human life and history. There's something so much better.

David Hartman, the Rabbi who has taught me so much, is the first person who incarnated for me one who could live fully today without all of that eschatological baggage and all of those questions about the future that we really don't know anything about, but could well just leave to God. I got a letter from him recently and in a lecture that he gave, the Cardinal Bernardin Jerusalem Lecture, he concluded it with these words,

My primary interest is in being alive and in finding significance in everyday reality. History has holiness, not because it points to the messianic kingdom. History has holiness when it provides opportunities to

live in a covenantal relationship with God. History has significance when we can bring God into everyday life.

And all God's people said ... Amen.