

Encouraging Hope
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Years ago in the 1800s, author George MacDonald penned a series of stories described by one person as “fairy tales or stories for the childlike.” He called them, *The Gifts of the Child Christ*. (1973, Eerdmanns Publishing Company) In the title story, MacDonald tells of a five-year-old girl whose given name was “Sophy,” but somewhere along the way the consonants were transposed and she was called “Phosy.” The story begins at Advent season when little Phosy is looking forward to the coming of the Christ child. As with many children of her age, she took things literally, so that when the preacher said that the Christ Child was coming again this Christmas and that everyone should look for his coming, little Phosy really believed he was literally, physically coming. MacDonald tells it this way:

It was the morning of Christmas day, and little Phosy knew it in every cranny of her soul He was coming to-day – how would he come? Where should she find the baby Jesus? And when would he come? In the morning, or the afternoon, or in the evening? Could such a grief be in store for her that he would not appear until night, when she would again be in bed? But she would not sleep until all hope was gone. . . . Anyhow she would get up and dress, and then she would be ready for Jesus whenever he should come. (53)

I am not going to give away the ending of the story, except to say that Jesus does indeed come in a way that is both surprising and redemptive. Our lectionary passage today talks about the second coming of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Paul writes:

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (NIV)

As we begin looking at this passage from Paul’s letter to an early church, we hear statements talking about the return of Christ, who will come from heaven and gather up the faithful – living and dead – to return to God’s presence. It is part of our scripture and our understanding that there will be a second coming and Christ will return someday. However, the early Christians to whom Paul is writing these words believed that it would be happening very soon – in their lifetime. This kind of prediction or expectation is

nothing new. In fact if we go back and look throughout history, we will find it happening again and again.

When I served as Associate Pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Snellville, I can remember one church member bringing me a book by NASA engineer Edgar Whisenhart called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will be in 1988*. (The “rapture” is another term for the second coming of Christ.) One can go back through history, all the way to the time of our letter from Paul and see that this is nothing new. Even Paul is dealing with this in the early church.

However, if we go back before the time of these early churches to the time of Jesus, we even find Jesus saying these words as recorded in Mark’s gospel: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mark 13:32, NRSV) So, not only is this a concern in the time of Jesus, but more importantly Jesus himself says that even he doesn’t know when this will take place. No one knows except God the Father -- which says something very important for us to hear when there is speculation about the date and time of all of these events: *no one knows the day and time – not even Jesus*.

I think it is a little strange that someone should think that he or she can somehow figure out what Jesus says clearly *no one will know – not even Jesus!* If we take the Bible and the words of Jesus seriously, then I think it is pretty clear that speculating and trying to predict the right day and time is not where Jesus says we need to be focusing our attention. In fact, it may just make us more anxious and fearful. Paul tells his early church that we should be about encouraging one another – not scaring each other to death. (1 Thessalonians 4:18, NIV)

Beneath all of this fear about the end of the world is a view of creation that really goes against what the Bible teaches. Scholar N.T. Wright has opened the eyes of many in recent years by going back to the Bible to see what it really says about the end times, resurrection, and heaven. Wright says that if you really look at what the Bible says, the overall view of the scripture is not that the world is evil and we need to try to escape from this place and go to heaven to get away from it all. (*Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, 2008) While there is certainly a resurrection and a heaven, Wright says that the overall theme of the Bible is about how God is at work saving and redeeming humankind and all of creation – not destroying it because it is so bad.

In the book of Revelation there are those wonderful words we often read at funerals that talk about a new heaven and a new earth. (Rev. 21:1) And in Paul’s letter to the church at Rome, he talks about all of creation groaning and waiting until the time when God’s salvation will redeem not only us, but creation itself. (Rom. 8:19-23) God is about saving and redeeming humankind and all of creation – putting things back right the way they should be. We look around at creation and we know the world is not the way it should be. There is still so much pain and suffering, particularly during this pandemic, but God has a plan to bring about that transformation. Easter was not only about God being more

powerful than death and therefore we, as believers, do not have to fear death. Easter is the beginning of God's plan to bring transformation to the whole world. That is what the Bible teaches.

Paul and others in the early church were constantly battling with those called the Gnostics. As Paul said they were those who were working their way into the early church to preach a "different" gospel. Gnosticism focused on this world being evil, and therefore the goal was to receive a special knowledge or *gnosis* in order to escape this evil world and go into the spiritual realm. And if you were a part of that elite group that had this special knowledge, you could escape. That theme keeps popping up again and again throughout history. (See *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, by Philip J. Lee, Oxford Univeristy Press, 1987) So today we see folks who want to form select groups of people who wait on mountaintops for someone to take them away. But Paul tells us that is not what we as Christians need to be doing.

In fact, in this early church to whom Paul writes these letters, some have responded to the idea of Christ coming soon by becoming what Paul calls "idlers" and "busybodies." (2 Thessalonians 3:11) The way they have chosen to respond to the idea that Jesus was coming soon was to stop working. So, they just quit and started relying on others who are still working to take care of them. This apparently is causing some problems in that early church. Not only that, they seem to be using their newly found free time to mess with other's business and become "busybodies." Paul tells them very clearly that is not how they should respond to the second coming of Jesus. This is where I believe our passage speaks to us today. How do we respond as Christians to someone who says the rapture or the second coming of Christ, and maybe even the end of the world, will happen soon? What should be our response as Christians?

For a number of years, I taught a Wednesday morning Bible study at another church. Each week John and Ann Hudson would come as part of that group as we sat together and talked about the Bible. John was a retired engineer from Georgia Tech. He was a great guy with a keen mind who always had a twinkle in his eye. He was a good student of the Bible and he actually liked to read it in Spanish as well as English as a way to keep up his language skills.

About every two months John would ask me, no matter what we were talking about, what I thought of the book *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey. If you have never heard of the book, it was written in the late 1960s. The author looked at the book of Revelation, took all of the symbolic language found in the book, and created a timeline for what would happen at the end of the world. It was like the *Left Behind* series of books and movies. It was one way of interpreting that book of Revelation -- though certainly not the only way. And we would spend time talking about whether it was the best way to read those passages, or if there were other ways to interpret them.

One day, after we talked about it, I can remember asking the folks this question: Suppose you knew somehow that Jesus was coming back at the end of this week, what would you do? Folks talked about different things, but there was one person who said this: "I would

go out and charge whatever I wanted to on my credit card.” Now I have taught for a number of years, and if you have ever been in a class with me you know I work really hard to find something good in whatever someone says. But this is one of the few times I was tempted to say simply, “Wrong!” (I didn’t say that, but I wanted to.) Yet, isn’t it interesting that when it comes to the second coming of Christ, this person’s response was to go out and get more stuff with no intent of paying for it. I think she missed the point. I think that what Paul is trying to say to those members of the early church who think that the best way to respond to the second coming of Christ is to quit working and mooch off of everybody else while meddling in everyone’s business, Paul might be saying to them “Wrong! You’re missing the point.”

The Bible says that since we do not know when Jesus will return because it will be “like a thief in the night,” then *we should live every day and every moment as if Jesus were coming back very soon*. In other words, keep on doing the things Jesus told us to do. Paul later says this in his letter to that same early church:

Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. . . . May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.
(1 Thessalonians 5:13b-18, 23-24, NIV)

In other words, *live every day as if Jesus were coming by living the way Jesus taught us to live*. There is not a lot in there about being afraid or making all sorts of strange plans. Focus on what is important here and now. So when we hear these predictions about the end of the world and the second coming of Christ, or we face difficult times like we are in now that feel like the end of the world, instead of trying to work out some scheme for knowing when and where – use this as a time to remind all of us to live each day “as if” Jesus were coming soon. For example, think about those relationships that we need to repair -- if it is up to us. Think about those around us who need our help. And trust that the God who created this world and who sent Jesus into the world to save it is working out God’s plans. And in the end, because of God’s grace, it will be okay.

When I was pastor of the Big Canoe Chapel, every Monday morning our staff would gather. We began each meeting with a devotional and we rotated that responsibility between the members of the staff. One week it was our receptionist, Linda’s day to share. Linda told me beforehand that she was a little nervous about it because it wasn’t really her thing. But when it came time to share, in expectation of the upcoming Mother’s Day, she began by talking about her own mother. This is part of what Linda shared with us:

I had seventeen years with my mother before she died. It was long enough for me to know her purpose in life as a mother. Not only did she take care of us every

day physically, she prepared us for the future. The most important thing she did for us was take us to church so we would learn that Jesus loved us and that we were a child of God. She modeled for us a positive attitude and hope by having faith in God. I remember many things she said in troubled times: “When one door closes, God will open another” and “God will provide.” She also said things like “God did not promise you a rose garden, but he does promise he is there beside us always with his grace and strength and something good will come out of this. Besides, life would be boring if we had everything we wanted!” She used the word “reckin’” a lot.....like I reckon’ it is time to do my work or I reckon’ it is time to go to bed. But there was another way she would use the word like, “I just need some time to reckon’ with God”. It was years later that I understood what she was talking about. It was when she needed time for reckoning with God to sort things out for peace and understanding. I understand that now because we make choices and sometimes the results are not what we expected and I too have to do some reckoning with God.

Linda’s mother seemed like a pretty wise person – like someone who seemed to know just the right word to say (or not to say) in order to encourage others, helping them to understand what was going on – especially in hard times. Her encouragement gave hope.

Michael Shermer is the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine. He is not a believer, as you might imagine. He wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about why he believes prophecies of doom are so commonplace in human history. He believes it has to do with how our brains evolve. But at the end of his article he said these words:

For human beings, it is much easier to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune when we believe that it is all part of a deeper, unfolding plan. We may feel like flotsam and jetsam on the vast rivers of history, but when the currents are directed toward a final destination, it gives us purpose and meaning. We want to feel that no matter how chaotic, oppressive, or evil the world may be, all will be made right in the end. (*The Wall Street Journal*, “The Enduring Appeal of the Apocalypse”, May 14, 2011)

Now I actually agree with what Shermer says here, but I want to say that I believe that what he talks about is not just the creation of the evolving brain -- but that this hope it really is true! *There is a final destination and it will be alright in the end.* That is God's promise that we hold on to as followers of Jesus the Christ – a hope to encourage us all.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.