

Tick ... Tock

Isaiah 64: 1-9; Mark 13: 24-37

First Sunday of Advent, (Nov. 27) 2011

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The comedian George Carlin had an old stand-up routine in which he expressed astonishment over those opinion polls on television news networks like CNN and FOX, where some debatable question is posed and people are invited to phone in and vote their views. Carlin said, “Did you ever notice there’s always like 18% who vote, ‘I don’t know’? It costs a dollar to make those calls,” he said, “and they’re voting ‘I don’t know.’” Carlin went on imagining some guy seeing the question of the day on the TV screen and saying to his wife, “Honey, give me that phone!” He shouts “I don’t know!” into the phone and then says proudly to his wife, “Sometimes you have to stand up for what you believe you’re not sure about.” Carlin went on to speculate that these same people probably call 1-900 numbers for \$3.00 a minute to say, “I’m not in the mood.” (from Tom Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, p. 111).

Every year the First Sunday of Advent rolls around right on the heels of Thanksgiving. The relatives are barely gone, the house is a mess, we’re tired of turkey, and we have all the work facing us that we put off for the holiday. Christmas music is blaring, we’re already feeling the pressure of gift shopping and getting the decorations up – if we didn’t already put them up over the holiday, and we show up in church on the lightly attended First Sunday of Advent and we’re faced with these strange texts from the Gospels about the Second Coming of Christ, the signs of the end of time with the sun darkening, the moon not giving its light, the stars falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens shaken. I

wonder if you were asked this morning “What do you think about eschatology? What is your opinion of the last things and the New Testament promise that “the Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory?” would you vote, “I don’t know?” And to listen to a sermon on such things you might very well say, “I’m not in the mood.”

For some of us, we grew up in churches where such talk from the pulpit was a regular occurrence and we heard more than enough about the details upon details of the Second Coming and End Times and Judgment Day, most all taken from the sidebar notes of the old Scofield Reference Study Bible. And since most of the scriptures cited were strange and incomprehensible but nevertheless shouted from the pulpit with an urgency that doom was coming – we associate these scriptures and teachings with fear-based religion. For good reason we’ve left such matters behind us.

Others of us didn’t grow up around such things but we still associate such talk with weird Fundamentalist religion and we certainly didn’t come to Austin Heights to hear this stuff.

Strangely enough there was a time about a hundred to one hundred and fifty years ago when most all the branches of the Protestant church in America had clear convictions about eschatology. A hundred or so years ago you heard eschatology talked about almost every Sunday from pulpits yet if sex was whispered about everyone was embarrassed. Now, we trumpet sermons on sex, from one perspective or another, while we’re embarrassed to talk about the Second Coming.

Eschatology is the study of last things; study of the End: Christ coming again, judgment, the end of time, heaven and hell, death and what comes after death, and so on. Furthermore, when we say it is about the End of Time, we mean

both the last thing but also the purpose, goal, and completion of time. What's it all about? What's the Big Picture? What's the purpose and meaning of life? That's eschatology. Often the New Testament deals with such matters in apocalyptic literature: apocalypse – which means unveiling, or revealing (hence the book of “Revelation”) is full of symbols and images, like Revelation, Daniel, and Ezekiel, and in this morning's Scripture from Mark. This morning we get both eschatology – last things, and apocalypse – highly symbolic language. What you won't get is yelling and fear-based religion. I also hope that when we leave this morning we won't have to vote, “I don't know.”

A hundred or so years ago talk about such matters tended toward a few general perspectives. Postmillennialism: which meant that the church was working to make things better – serving the needy, sending missionaries, building hospitals and colleges, reforming politics, helping organize sewer and water systems, municipal fire and police protection, and utilities all under public control not private, prohibition and temperance, working for women getting the vote, outlawing child labor, and on and on. All were ways that the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Social Gospel was worked out, and most of this was under the perspective of Postmillennialism – that after a millennium of this, after 1,000 years or after a long time, then Christ would return again. The premise was that we were working doing God's will and hastening the return of Christ.

On the other hand, in American evangelicalism – which was predominant in our part of the world and still is, there was the contrary view of what we call Premillennialism. This was and is the view that things are getting worse and worse until someday that Christ will come again. After Christ comes there will be 1,000 years of Christ's reign on earth until the final judgment day. Our job is simply to

convert people to Christ and wait for the coming again of Christ. If we make things better in this world all we'll be doing is delaying Christ.

Postmillennial – symbolically a millennium of helping improve the world and then Christ will come. Premillennial – Christ will come first and then a more literal millennium. Those were the two main ways of thinking about such matters a century ago. What happened is that 1914 came along and the worst world-wide war anyone had ever seen in history, most of which was between educated, and so-called Christian nations – which pretty much destroyed the optimism of Postmillennialism. All that was left in the smoking ruins was Premillennialism – which we still have among us, full of strange, fear-filled apocalyptic versions, and on the other hand, a kind of secularized Postmillennialism without God, ending up with faith in progress, developmental philosophy and education, and so on.

The two perspectives don't go well together. As one biblical scholar put it, when Scripture says, "The stars will fall from heaven and the sun will cease its shining; the moon will be turned to blood and fire mingled with hail will fall from the heavens," we don't expect the next phrase to be, "The rest of the country will be partly cloudy with scattered showers" (see Tom Long, p. 115). Which is why we tend to get one view or the other but not the two together.

But one way or another we are the children of such mixed up views. We live in a part of the world where fear-based Premillennialism runs rampant, especially with television preachers, and many of us were raised in those kinds of churches. At the same time, while trying to put some of those excesses behind us, we meanwhile work busy as bees trying to make the world better but without any prospect that Christ is in charge or will come again; without any vision of the Big Picture or how it will all make sense.

What I want you to hear this morning is that eschatology is at the heart of the New Testament. Not the literal, weird fear-filled vision that believes that if we'll back the modern nation-state of Israel we can hasten the day of Armageddon and Christ's return. Not that and all that literalism. You can't make the apocalyptic literal – not in the first century and not now. **What I want us to recover is the sense that what we see is not all there is. That the full disclosure of God is not fully contained in the present and that we live and serve in hope of the promise of Christ Jesus that all will finally be redeemed and reconciled and all will make sense. And because we live in hope, how we live today makes a difference.**

In Walker Percy's two novels *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, both set in the near future where the church has become so Americanized that the Star-Spangle Banner is sung every time at the Elevation of the Host by the priest in the Eucharist, and the mission of the church has become to make America successful. But out in the woods is a small scattered band of Christians who resist, demoralized and diffused, but who still gather together for worship and the Eucharist under the leadership of an old priest, Father Smith. At night the old priest climbs up in a fire-watch tower searching the heavens for signs and portents of the Lord and during the day the priest and the small band of Christians run an AIDS hospice caring for the dying.

Because of what they believe about the End, they care for those dying of AIDS in the present. The hope of God's future intrudes into our present, bringing love and tenderness to the dying, peace in the midst of conflict, and joy even in the middle of lament.

This old view, much older than 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Postmillennialism and

Premillennialism, going back to the early church, is that the End has already begun to break into the present in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega; he is the Beginning and the End of all things. In Jesus Christ, we see what the End looks like. He shows us the purpose and goal of all history. In the Birth, Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's future began to break into our present. And those of us who follow Jesus join him in living today what the future will look like. And someday, in Christ, all will finally be completed and redeemed.

In Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, the swords are beaten into plowshares. So how do we live our lives and the life of this church, how do we raise our children and youth in light of this Prince of Peace? How do we followers of Jesus start living that out now? For example, Matthew tells us in chapter 25, that we will be judged according to how we treated the least of Christ's brothers and sisters. It follows then that we need to re-evaluate how we spend our time, how we make and spend our money, and what we do based upon the justice seen in Christ. If we are to be judged by the One Whom Matthew 23: 37 refers to as a hen who gathers her brood under her wings, then you and I and this church must re-evaluate what compassion really is. And if Christ is coming again to bring all history together, then our business-as-usual-I'm-too-busy-workaholic schedules need new priorities.

What happens in the End defines what happens in the middle. That's why Advent, the beginning of a new church year, begins with the End. We read everything the rest of the year from the End today.

Frank Kermode was a great English literary critic who died about a year ago. He had an influential book called *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* in which he said that the basic structure of plot is this: tick ... tock. He

said that tick gets the plot going, gives it momentum, but that everything leans forward and is governed by tock. He went on to say, “The Greeks ... thought that even the gods could not change the past; but Christ did change it, rewrote it, and in a new way fulfilled it ... the End changes all” (*The Sense of Ending*, p. 45-47; cited in Tom Long, p. 127).

The tick gets things moving but the tock is what what everything leans toward. Tick ... tock. Without the tock, the tick leaves us hanging. The tock is what gives the tick meaning.

There is an old African-American spiritual “Nobody knows who I am until the Judgment Day.” Who I am right now is not determined by racists or by hatred or discrimination. I’m not a slave; I’m not cannon fodder; I’m not the poor whom all the powerful ignore or impugn. Who I am is determined by Christ on Judgment Day. The tock gives the tick meaning. The End shapes the present.

A woman was visiting Dachau, the Nazi death camp located outside of Munich. When she saw the photos and looked at the gas chambers, she cried a prayer, “O God do not let this be the last word.”

Nobody knows who I am until the Judgment Day. Tick ... Tock.

At the graveside of a funeral we’ll hear: In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our *brother* N.; and we commit *his* body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless *him* and keep *him*, the Lord make his face to shine upon *him* and be gracious unto *him*, the Lord lift up his countenance upon *him* and give *him* peace. Then we’ll hear, O Almighty God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, who by a voice from heaven didst proclaim, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord: Multiply, we beseech thee, to those who rest in Jesus the

manifold blessings of thy love, that the good work which thou didst begin in them may be made perfect unto the day of Jesus Christ. And of thy mercy, O heavenly Father, grant that we, who now serve thee on earth, may at last, together with them, be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; for the sake of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. – None of this makes sense apart from “Nobody knows who I am until the Judgment Day.” Tick ... Tock.

In the novel and movie *No Country for Old Men* it seems that evil, in the person of the cold-blooded hit man is overwhelming. Late in the novel, Sheriff Bell is beginning to realize that he is not simply fighting crime, flesh, and blood, but the principalities and powers. He remembers why he went into law enforcement, “Part of it was I always thought I could at least someday put things right and I guess I just don’t feel that way no more. ... But I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there ain’t nothing short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train.”

Nobody knows who I am until the Judgment Day. Tick ... Tock.

The homeless men were eating in the church fellowship hall with Christmas decorations hanging on the walls. Long silence; only the noise of forks and spoons and dishes and hungry men eating. Out of the silence, a man asks, “What is the good news anyway?” More silence. No one knew what to say. Out of silence, another voice, “The good news is that it don’t have to be like this.”

Nobody knows who I am until the Judgment Day. Tick ...Tock. It doesn’t have to be like this. And someday it won’t.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ is coming again. Amen and amen.