

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-33

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Advent Sunday

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I had a conversation with an older man last week. He's approaching 90, and his health is in active decline. He recalled something Harold Shirley, our church's first pastor, used to say. "My home is in heaven," Dr. Shirley would say. "I'm just not ready to go home yet."

The man looked at me and with a quiver in his voice said, "Pastor, I'm ready to go home."

I can appreciate both of those statements. The young and strong are not ready to go home yet. They are full of vim and vigor. Life stretches before them. They have challenges to conquer and contributions to make. A home in heaven can wait.

Some of us will reach a place where we are no longer young and strong. The vim and vigor will be gone. The challenges of daily life will seem overwhelming. And we will begin to look forward, to a world beyond, to the realm we call heaven. We will see it as our ultimate home. We will long for it. With hope. With peace.

There is painful blessedness in that. Painful because it marks an end to this home we have known for decades. Blessed because we know it is our ultimate home.

When we sing the carol "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," it has a deep and profound meaning for some of us. It anticipates the end, whatever that will look like. I've abandoned trying to understand or explain what the end will be like. I tell people now that's beyond my pay grade. Now I try to practice simple belief, childlike hope. Not childish

but childlike. And for me that's enough. I think it was for the man I spoke with this past week.

Our text from Luke 21 has caused undue distress for some people. It's Luke's version of that strange chapter in Mark 13 called the Little Apocalypse. Scholars think Luke actually had a copy of Mark 13 as he wrote Luke 21. Luke used parts of Mark exactly, changed a few parts, and left some out entirely. Jesus was telling his listeners about the end. Using apocalyptic language, he talked about the sun, moon, and stars, distress among the nations, and people fainting from fear and foreboding. That's the distressing part.

Then he told a story about a fig tree. This is where our focus should be. When a fig tree begins to leaf out, we know that summer is not far. The fresh, bright green growth is evidence that summer is near. Likewise, we will begin to see telltale signs of our own end. We will begin to look forward, to a world beyond, to that realm we call heaven. We will begin to see it as our ultimate home and long for it.

I was privileged to study with one of this country's finest New Testament scholars, Dr. Allan Culpepper. He spoke here several years ago. He was working on a commentary on the Gospel of Mark at the time he was my professor. He came into class one day, stood before the class, and quoted the entire Gospel of Mark. That's how immersed he was in it. He also wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Luke, and I want to share with you part of what he wrote:

The Gospel teaches that beyond the end of time stands the Lord, who has come among us in the person of Jesus.... The end of time holds no terror for those who know God's love because they know the one who determines the reality that lies beyond what we can know here and now. (They) can approach the end with heads raised high, knowing that their redemption is near.

Here's another way of saying that: "Pastor, I'm ready to go home."

So come, Thou long expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free.