Christ’s Two Advents



Co-missioners,

Today’s post is both late and timely. Late, because it discusses a text we heard in church two weeks ago on this year’s First Sunday of Advent. Timely, because the issues God pushed us to face that day are issues we deal with every day. “How are we judged?” “Who does the judging?”

Our thanks to Steve Kuhl for unraveling a text that preachers shrink from and hearers would rather avoid. Turns out there’s Gospel lurking in these words. Marvelous Gospel.

Peace and Joy,

Christ's Two Advents

by Steven C. Kuhl

Calendars are very helpful for marking the meaning of corporate life. Just as the year-long secular calendar maps out our journey around the sun, highlighting the meaningful moments as holidays, so the liturgical calendar maps out our journey with the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, highlighting the holy days. In the Christian calendar, Advent is the first of the liturgical seasons, and since this year tradition assigns us Year C in the lectionary cycle, Luke will be our guide in our journey with Christ.

The word “Advent” means “coming.” Therefore, the focus of the season is neatly captured by the phrase, “here comes the Son,” with apologies to George Harrison. But already at the start of the season we have a complication. The plan of salvation as set forth in the “good news of Jesus Christ” includes two comings, two advents: one “in the middle of time” and one “at the end of time.” That there would/will be two advents was unexpected. The expectation was that the “Messiah” or “Son of Man” (the terms represented two vying traditions in Jesus’ day) would come ONLY once at the end of time and come to establish righteousness once

and for all in a world that obviously lacks it. Therefore, the big question this two-Advent scenario presented to God's people, not only then, but still now, is this: How do these two "comings" relate? That is the question lurking in the text for Advent 1, Luke 21:25-36.



This text is Luke's presentation of how Jesus dealt with the question of the end of the world, what theology calls "eschatology." The common assumption is that history is terminal, meaning that not only will our individual histories come to an end, but history itself will come to an end. But that "end" does not just mean that everything will simply fizzle out. The "end of history" is judgment day. It's like a person finally getting his or her day in court. It means God issuing his final verdict on the world (and all our individual histories) whose emergence he set into motion at the beginning of time and whose destiny he will decide at the end of time.

Although it is certainly unsettling, the only thing we can know for sure is that the day of judgment is coming. What we can't know yet is when that day will come, on what basis or criteria the judgment will be made, and what the judge's final verdict will be for me. Or can we? That's the big "aha" in Jesus' eschatological teaching. What Jesus (who claims to be the end-time judge) does in his first coming holds the key to how he will judge in his second coming. And, in a sense, he leaves judgment in our own hands. For the judgment we render on him and

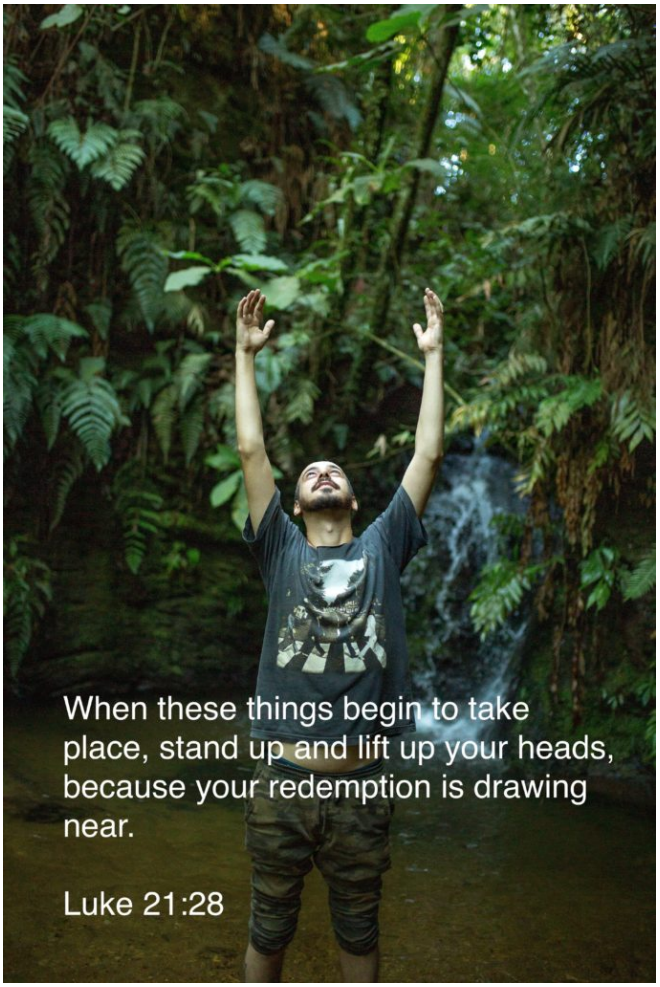
his history (his life, death and resurrection) will be the judgment he renders on us and our history.

With that overarching picture of Jesus' eschatology (according to Luke), let's look at the text in detail, beginning with its context. The text is part of a larger discourse that begins when Jesus responds to what "some people" were saying "about the temple," specifically, "how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God" (21:5). One can't help but imagine that they assumed that how-they-adorned-the-temple must have some lasting impact on how-God-will-adorn-them. But Jesus bursts their bubble on that assumption. With prophetic utterance Jesus says "As for these things that you see, the day will come when not one stone will stand on another; all will be thrown down" (21:6). That utterance of Jesus provokes the question of when this will be and what signs will precede it.

For Jesus, that's the wrong question, as his response indicates. Everything that happens in history is a sign of the fleeting, terminal nature of this world: wars, insurrections, the rise and fall of nations, earthquakes, famines, plagues, even portents in the heavens like comets, lunar and solar eclipses (cf. 21:9-11). And for Jesus' own followers, another sign of this will be persecution (21:12-19). Rather, the right question has to do with "from whence does our help come" (Ps.121:1). And Jesus makes it clear that he is our help. Therefore, he counsels, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in [his] name and say, 'I am he!' and 'the time is near!' Don't go after them" (21:8).

The upshot is that there is no timeline or sequence of events

that can be used to know when the end will come; and this is exactly how Luke, next in this discourse (21:20-24), frames Jesus' prophetic prediction of the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. As Luke's readers know, the prophecy of Jesus (given in 30 AD) was fulfilled (in 70 AD). Still, the end of the world has not yet come. Therefore, Jesus' prophesy serves his point that calamities will come and go and yet the end awaits. But this prophecy (or "word") also serves a greater purpose. It underscores that Jesus is a prophet whose word comes true. The temple will pass away; indeed, as he will say later, "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (21:33). Jesus' word is the only thing that is unshakeable. Therefore, we see that the narrative logic of Luke's Gospel is the historical logic of God: the logic of prophecy/promise and fulfillment, just as we've seen much earlier in Luke's presentation of the birth and infancy narratives. What God says will happen.



This theo-logic of God in history is very important as we now turn to the immediate text at hand (21:25-33). Here Jesus does address the end of history, not by giving us a sequence of events on earth, but by telling us how people will respond to the movement of God in heaven towards earth in judgment. Jesus says, when the end finally comes—not only for our individual

histories, but for history itself—people will “faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken” (v. 26). And here is the movement of God that they will see when the end comes: they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27).

Note who they will see coming! They will see “the Son of Man.” And note why that title is important: because it is the public title Jesus used to describe himself. And note how they will see him: “coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” That is significant too, because the world has not seen him that way before. Before his second coming, Jesus is seen by the world only as a man of suffering, the one the world hung on a cross, the one the world continues to regard as of no account. And that is also how the world sees Jesus’ disciples—hence, their persecution (21:12-19).



True, Jesus’ disciples did see the exalted Jesus after he was resurrected. And, upon seeing him, note their response: “they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost” (24:37). The encounter with the resurrected Lord was their judgment day. But what made all the difference in the world for them is that Jesus had already given them his reassuring word: “Peace be with you” (24:36). That is the verdict the resurrected Jesus gives not only to his disciples, but through his disciples to the world. The only question is, will they accept Jesus’ verdict or not? Will they believe it? “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (18:8).

In effect, then, that is what Jesus' second coming is all about. He returns to "find faith on earth." He comes to see who has accepted his verdict of peace so he can fulfill his promise of mercy (1:54-55) for them that he accomplished in his first coming through his death and resurrection. In essence, then, with the judgment (call it faith or unfaith) that people judge Jesus, the Son of Man, so will they be judged. Or, as Luther put it, as we believe so we have.

That explains why, when the "powers of heaven are shaken" and the Son of Man returns to earth, those who have already received his clemency by faith can "stand up and raise their heads" (v. 28). For they know that Jesus, the Son of Man, is not just the end-time judge, but their redeemer (v. 28). Having received his verdict in advance, they know that their redemption is assured and that their dying is safely in his hands.



But more, this redemption is also evidenced already in the way believers approach life on this side of the Parousia (i.e., the second coming), especially as they face the day-to-day calamities of life. Take, for example, those calamities that are unique to believers: the persecutions they face on account of the name of Jesus they bear. They regard them as an "opportunity to testify" (21:13) to the "words and wisdom" given them by

Jesus (21:15), specifically, in this text, the word and wisdom that “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (v. 33). Second, because that “word and wisdom” relativizes the calamities of this world and deprives them of “ultimate concern,” to use Tillich’s phrase, no matter what happens, believers “are not weighed down in dissipation, drunkenness (i.e., distraction), and the worries of this life” (v. 34), but buoyed up in the hope that their “redemption is drawing near” (v. 28). This means, as Luke says over and over again, that our life on this side of the Parousia can be wholly dedicated to the love and service of one another because our life on the other side of the Parousia has been wholly secured by Christ in his first coming.



Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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