

Jesus is Coming... Look Busy
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28
Isaiah 6:1-4, 8-11

In the movie “Jakob the Liar,” Robin Williams plays a Jewish shop keeper living in a ghetto in Poland during World War II. One night he is out after curfew, so he is summoned to ghetto headquarters, but while he is waiting for the German Kommandant, Jakob overhears a radio broadcast about Russian troops approaching. When he returns to the ghetto, Jakob shares what he has heard with a friend. The next morning Jakob learns that his friend told everyone the good news about the troops, but also that Jakob himself had a radio. At first Jakob is afraid for his life because he knows that having a radio is punishable by death, but when he sees the hope that this news has given everyone, Jakob begins to make up his own daily updates about Allied forces advancing against the Nazis. Jakob knew that in their suffering and pain what the people needed was hope, and so he gave it to them with the promise that they would soon be saved. Unfortunately, their hope was based on lies.

When we read through the Old Testament, we find that no matter how bad things got for the Hebrew people, they remained hopeful because they knew that God was watching over them, and that one day God would send the Messiah who would make all things right.

And every year at Christmas time we celebrate the coming of this Messiah into our world, as we read the Christmas story about Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, and when there is no room in the inn, Mary, delivers her baby in a stable and lays him in a manger.

We’ve heard the story so many times and so it probably doesn’t even strike us as odd that the Messiah comes to us in such a humble manner. The Hebrew people had been waiting for hundreds of years with the expectation that when the Messiah came he would enter into our world and overwhelm it. And so when we step back and realize that Jesus is born to, cared for, and nurtured by a peasant couple, it just doesn’t make sense.

I guess that’s why we have hymns such as “Away in a Manger.” Do you remember the one line that says, “The cattle are lowing... The poor Baby wakes... But little Lord Jesus... No crying He makes.” The image that we are given is of this newborn baby who is wakened in the middle of the night by some animals but he doesn’t cry because after all he is the long awaited Messiah.

I get that he is the Messiah, but as a parent of three with one of them being ten months old, I have a real hard time believing that baby Jesus didn’t cry. In fact I have no doubt that as a baby, Jesus kept his parents up many nights crying because he was hungry or wet or just didn’t feel good. After all, we confess that Jesus was fully human. Human babies cry... a lot.

And so there he is... the Messiah... the one they’ve been waiting for... wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a trough which is used to feed animals.

We don’t hear much about Jesus as he grows up. Really the next thing we know is that Jesus is baptized and he begins his ministry healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, feeding the hungry, standing with the outcast, and preaching, “Believe the Good News, the Kingdom of God is here,” which is once again not what the people expected from their Messiah. In fact, when John the Baptist, who is in prison when Jesus begins his ministry, hears what is going on, he sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is the one they have been waiting for or if they should expect another?

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann explains, “In prison John hears about what the Messiah was doing ... acts of healing and mercy. To a fierce denouncer of the sins of the people,

the Messiah's primary task must be to carry out the final judgment, to see that the ax is laid to the root of the trees and to burn every tree that does not bear fruit. John expected the Messiah, to bring God's wrath. Why weren't Herod and the military leaders destroyed? Why were the religious leaders still in place? What about the morally weak? John expected the nations to be judged and punished, but that is not what Jesus does. What sort of Messiah could Jesus be who teaches in the synagogues, preaches the gospel of the kingdom, and heals every disease and infirmity? Jesus is not turning out to be the kind of Messiah John expected."

Regardless, he carries on with his ministry to the poor, the sick, and the outcast. But then the unthinkable happens. The Messiah is arrested, whipped and beaten, and nailed to a cross to die.

The night of his arrest as Jesus and the disciples were eating together Jesus told them, "Take heart! I have overcome the world." How hollow this statement would seem the next evening, when his pale, abused body hung on a cross. And with their Lord, the one they had left everything to follow... the one they had placed their hope in... dead, the disciples fled in fear.

You and I know the story... three days later Jesus is raised from the dead and when the time was right, he ascends into heaven... but as the disciples look around they notice that the poor are still poor... the hungry are still hungry... the sick and the broken, the lonely and the lost... they are all still there. The messiah was supposed to make all things right but nothing seems to have changed.

The year is 2016 and the voters have just elected the first woman as President of the United States. A few days after the election, the president-elect calls her father in South Carolina and asks, "So, Dad, I assume you will be coming to my inauguration?" "I don't think so. It's a long drive; your mom isn't as young as she used to be, we'll have the dog with us, and my arthritis is acting up in my knee."

"Don't worry about it, Dad, I'll send Air Force One to pick you up and take you home, and a limousine will pick you up at your door," she said. "I don't know. Everybody will be so fancy. What would your mother wear?" "Oh, Dad," she replied, "I'll make sure she has a wonderful gown custom-made by one of the best designers in New York." "Honey," Dad complained, "You know we can't eat those rich foods you and your friends like to eat."

She responds, "Don't worry, Dad. The entire affair is going to be handled by the best caterer in D.C. and I'll make sure your meals are salt-free. Dad, I really want you to come." So her parents reluctantly agreed, and on January 20, 2017, they arrive to see their daughter sworn in as President of the United States.

Seated in the front row, her dad notices a senator sitting next to him and so he leans over and whispers, "You see that woman over there with her hand on the Bible, becoming President of the United States?" The Senator whispered in reply, "Yes I do." Dad says proudly, "Her brother played football at Clemson University."

So often, we make our minds up as to what we think we want or need and so when something amazing comes along, if it is not what we expected, we don't always appreciate it or even realize what we have been given.

Jesus was not the Messiah the people expected, but the Messiah's work is not done.

Turning to the book of Acts we hear that after Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples, and in time, Paul and others go out into the world establishing churches, and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

One of these churches that Paul established was the church in Thessalonica which we read about in Acts 17. We hear that Paul and his companions (Silas and Timothy) went to

Thessalonica, and as was his custom, Paul immediately located the synagogue and he shared with them the story of Jesus. Paul shared about his life, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension into heaven, but he also shared that one day soon Jesus would return.

But at Thessalonica Paul faced opposition from some of the Jewish people there, and so they were forced to leave earlier than they had planned. With the abrupt departure, Paul was naturally anxious about the church that had just been established, and so he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage them, to further ground the new disciples in the faith, and to learn how they were enduring persecution.

When Timothy returned to Paul, the news was mostly encouraging. Despite persecution they had remained strong, and even proved themselves to be an example to others. Yet, as with any young church, they needed further instruction. They also needed to be reassured that their loved ones who died in Christ would not miss out on the blessings when Christ returned.

So Paul writes them a letter and he encourages them in their trials and he assures them that those who have died in the Lord will be raised with him to new life. But it is clear that Paul's main focus in this letter is to give them hope by reminding them that when the Lord returns all things will be made right, but also to remind them how to live until that day comes.

Paul definitely thought they were living in the end times and that Jesus was coming back very soon, and with this same expectation, many of the Thessalonians had stopped working or going about their daily lives. So Paul tells them to be ready, but to not obsess or worry about when or how it will happen. He tells them that they need to live faithfully in the now.

Paul ends his letter saying, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil and may the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit, soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The first question is how do we pray without ceasing? And are we really supposed to rejoice or be thankful in the face of tragedy?

The difficulty for us is that we tend to divide life into God related activities and non God related activities. When we are at church, when we volunteer our time, when we pray before a meal, these are all God related activities. But when we are grocery shopping, when we are at school or work, when we are actually eating the meal, or when we are watching our favorite sports team play in a big game, these are all non God related activities.

Actually my Raiders play the Packers today at 4pm. While watching football might not seem like a God related activity, I can tell you there will be a lot of praying going on.

But what Paul wants us to realize is that everything is or should be God related. There is NOTHING that we do where God isn't present with us whether we realize it or not, and so we should treat all events as such. Every moment of our life... every decision we make, everything we do... we do with the reality of God's presence. And the images Paul uses of rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks... these are all images of worship.

When we come into worship we intentionally come before God... when we come into worship we intentionally allow ourselves to be confronted with what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be. When we come into worship our lives are oriented toward the Spirit of God at work in our lives. When we come into worship, we are sharing the life of God and allowing God to interrupt our lives to speak to us, to guide us, and to lead us.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances... Paul reminds us that these things should not be designated as Sunday activities, but that these things should be a

part of our everyday lives... they should be a part of who we are at all times... we need to live lives of worship toward God, so that instead of quenching the Spirit of God we might live in the Spirit who encourages us to question the status quo... test what is... and hold onto those things that are right and pure because God's plan for us is that we might be made holy.

Advent is a time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but it is also a time when we wait with anticipation for his return in his second coming. You and I, we live in the in between. Paul tells us that as such we are to live lives oriented to the new age that has come in Jesus Christ. An age which brings a new way of living that is about forgiveness and reconciliation and peace and generosity. It is an age where we are called to live in relationship to God and to one another. It is an age where disciples are charged and empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in the very messianic work of Jesus. When Jesus ascends into heaven, it is his disciples... his followers... you and I... who are called to take up his mission until he returns.

The Hebrew people expected a Messiah who would come into the world with authority and conquer it with power and might. But what we got, was a messiah, who came in the silence of the night virtually unnoticed by all, and as he grew he took up a ministry of caring for the sick, the poor, the broken, and the outcast. The revelation of Jesus as Messiah challenges us to rethink the very nature of who God is. We want and we expect a God who is in total control at all times... a God who will use force to make his will be done. But instead we meet Jesus who came to bring change and to teach us how to live in the in-between... Jesus who encourages and expects us to participate in the work of the Kingdom of God for this Kingdom is like no other. This king is not served, but instead he serves.

Christ has come and Christ will come again, but until that day, we have a lot of work to do.

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December 11, 2011