

Parousia as Crisis, Catharsis, & Surprise

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Chantee Parris, Yale Exchange Student

“He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead.”

We proclaim these words in our creed. But how do we really understand a second-coming that seems so mysterious and even overdue?

In our gospel today, Jesus explains the parousia as: “a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task,” then, he warns everyone to keep watch and be alert and don’t even risk getting caught sleeping.

In between all of the repetitions and re-mixes of the phrases “watch” and “be alert” is a legally binding Judaic code of how humans are to care for everyone from strangers to masters.

As Rabbi Johnathan Sacks explains in his work on the ethics of responsibility, “Greater is hospitality than receiving the divine presence itself... Jews performed kindness to one another because it was the way of God and also because they or their families had an intimate experience of suffering and knew that they had nowhere else to turn. It provided an access of grace in dark times...”

It’s not just inhospitable to be asleep when anyone, let alone the master comes to the door, but by Jesus’ own Judaic standards it is unGodly to not be conscious of the welcome and care of those who cross our paths.

Whether it’s Abraham running out of his tent to greet three men in the middle of a meeting with God, or Jephthah’s daughter running ahead of servants to greet her military dad first, or even the prodigal son’s father running out to greet the child who has squandered his hard-earned money, the attitude of welcome, expectation, and faithfulness is the litmus test of one’s standing with God.

At the heart of this matter of watchfulness, is our reverence for the hospitality that God has first shown to us through Jesus Christ. Brothers and Sisters, God is, was, and will be the houseowner who has given us the grace to occupy this home called Earth. Moreover, as 2 Peter 3:9 explains, God is not slow to come home but rather is, longsuffering towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

The faithfulness of our divine master and the salvation offered through Christ gives us much to hope for and even more to work for. Unfortunately, there is to be no rest for the weary when well-doing is our God-given task.

Through God's kindness, we have been given time to wake up, shape up, and to treat this house and its guest in the respective ways that the house-owner has instructed us to. This is especially the case during hard times. And it's safe to say that the days of distress when the sun, moon, and stars are proposed to stop working in the sky represent some hard times.

Hospitality is an issue in our readings today; but, we can't completely ignore the bulkier and creepier physical events that Jesus foretells before getting into his parable. There is a distinct physical aspect to the second coming in Mark's gospel that would be negligent to spiritualize.

When it comes to the second coming of the son of man, the gospel does a very good job of suggesting that it is soon and even goes as far to say that "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."

Though we may sometimes be more comfortable with a still small voice, or a quiet leading of the spirit, the biblical witness suggests that our conceptions of normality are often dramatically disrupted by God. This is even the case with the person of Christ. Although Jesus came to Earth already with a humble birth in a lowly manger, our gospel

says that Christ in glory –Jesus version 2.0 to be exact- will come again bursting through the sky.

Arguably more fierce and powerful than the itinerant carpenter who healed the sick, is Jesus 2.0 compatible with the first edition Jesus of Nazareth?

Although I have met individuals in this town who do not find this apocalyptic Jesus as helpful or even authentic as the mortal Jesus, my experience tells me otherwise.

An artist and author named Camilo Jose Vergara, who is most notable for his book, "How the Other Half Worships" studied and photographed storefront churches around American cities for a number of years before giving a lecture during my first year of seminary. Although he was very careful about avoiding generalizations and assumptions, he did make one observation. The poverty and violence in a neighborhood was directly proportional to how big and strong Jesus was depicted by the church's images and iconography. In the relatively affluent neighborhoods, Jesus was portrayed as a small, weak, and almost gothic man; but, in neighborhoods on the underbelly of the American nightmare Jesus had muscles. A visible and impressive power to balance if not counteract the forces that were destroying the community.

As a Christian of color who often finds myself on the outside of the dominant European notions of social value or even humanity, I embrace Christ as a man who ministered to the marginalized but I really REALLY like him as the glorious Lord of the second-coming and second chance for the world to be balanced. The early Christians all eagerly longed for Jesus 2.0, and the Jews still passionately hope for a mighty messiah. As helpful or unhelpful as you may find discourse about the parousia or apocalypse, there were and are significant groups of people who look forward to a better future through the physical manifestation of God's ability to save and heal—both imminently and economically. We celebrate the coming of Christ in advent; but, it seems as if people choose whichever Christ is most palatable based on how deeply suffering and injustice has affected their lives.

Whether one reads a bible passage about Paul, the former Christian persecutor, building churches across the Mediterranean, or Noah building an Ark to withstand a

decimating flood, or even Joseph rising from a pit to an Egyptian palace to feed and establish the twelve tribes of Israel, there is a pattern of God subverting yet redeeming communities in the textual witness of God's work on Earth. If Christianity is correctly understood as a historical movement motivated by the salvation of God's creation, then Christians of today can look at Jesus of the apocalypse with the same dedication and reverence as is given to the suffering Christ—especially in light of the crises that we face today.

Whether it be the killings in Mumbai, or the natural disasters and economic collapses that we have seen, humankind has and will continue to have Earth-shattering moments when we realize that our hope in life can not be based in money, governments, or even our bodies. Depending on the level and circumstances of the crisis, there will either be a breaking point and end of a cycle or an opportunity to move forward in the aftermath of an altered playing field. During crisis, the privileged might learn what the underprivileged have always known, that no system works for all people all of the time. Or, we may realize that our struggles, disparities, and differences are deeper than we had previously prepared for or even imagined. We keep watch for Christ at this time and the end of the ages because we do not know the day or hour yet we are still called to work, live into, as well as hope for God's will to be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Our reading from Corinthians tells us that we can work through whatever crisis we need to since we have been enriched in every way, we do not lack any spiritual gift, and we are kept strong to the end, so that we will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. The second coming, can ultimately be seen as both the hope and reality in which the divine and mundane are one.

We are not waiting in vain because, just as the structure and climax of the gospel of Mark reveals, Christ is the good news and movement of God. And whether *parousia* is translated as an arrival or as a presence, our welcome and recognition of Christ is crucial his second coming. During this advent season, let us remember that we can only recognize that which has been a part of our consciousness and lives. According to the gospel, our surprise when we encounter Christ in full glory is a guarantee, yet at the end

of the day, our ecstasy or agony will be directly related to our awareness of Christ in our personal experience as well as our embrace of those who also come to God's door. Are you running out to meet God in the places where Christ can be found?

In his first coming, Jesus taught, healed, and died so that even the least of these can enjoy a better future. Apocalyptic literature as seen in the book of Daniel and today's little apocalypse of Mark represents a community and tradition of people looking forward to a tangible manifestation of a better future. They hoped through dedicated lives of service and dreams and stories of freedom that they passed down from generation to generation.

Let us take our hope in Christ just as seriously. Though the apocalypse may still seem creepy or even illogical, waiting for Christ is the reason for Advent season.

And just as we have and will proclaim together, "He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead."

AMEN.