

Sermon 12-2-18
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Trinity Lutheran Church
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Which Reality?

Carol and I were enjoying a Burger King dinner on Friday when she leaned over to me and whispered, “look behind you.” There were people behind me and I didn’t want to be too conspicuous, so I turned partially to the right. There moving out of sight around the soda machine was a college age woman. The back of her jacket was written over with all kinds of words that I didn’t get time to read, but in large unmistakable letters it said, “I believe in Nothing.”

I laughed to myself and turned back to Carol saying, “that jacket contradicts itself.” I was hoping the woman would sit down somewhere and I might have opportunity to dialogue, but she disappeared with whatever group she was with. I would have asked her, “Are you sure you believe in nothing? Here’s the part I don’t get. How can you believe that you believe in nothing?” You see, she had to believe in something – namely that she believed in nothing.

“I believe in Nothing” is one of those bizarre little statements of rebellion that winds up falsifying itself. It’s like the rebel slogan, “there is no truth.” If that statement is true it falsifies itself. One truth must remain – namely the statement itself. If it is false, it also falsifies itself. There is truth. That’s why the short answer to “there is no truth” is, “Is that true?” I’m not the one playing word games here. It’s the people who come up with and adopt these rebellious statements who are playing the word games. It has escaped them that the logic of their boastful statements self-destructs.

If you’re a living human being, you have to believe in something – even if you boast it’s believing in nothing. So, what we believe is of crucial importance. For even in her boastful rebellion, this young lady still believes that there is meaning in life. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be out with friends on a Friday night. She believes in morality and that other people should act morally. Otherwise, she would secure herself behind locked doors with a gun fearing for her possessions, her person and her very life. She even believes she has some kind of destiny in life. For, she’s not among the hopeless living on the street. Rebellion is fun – until reality sets in. Unfortunately for some, reality never sets in.

But which reality? That’s life’s big question. For, over the course of history humans have believed in many different realities. And we’re constantly coming up with new ones or revamping old ones. All the world religions and philosophies are literally different realities playing in peoples’ heads.

Therefore, Christianity might be considered one reality in the midst of many other equally valid realities. Indeed, that’s the way Christianity’s present day enemies want to see it, and want Christians to see it. But real Christianity has never

said that about itself. Christianity has historically made the claim that it is the only true and valid reality. Now, the truth of that claim will not become fully apparent until the Day of Christ's return. But when that Day comes Jesus Christ will be revealed for Who He truly is. The reality He spoke of – His Kingdom – will be revealed for the reality and the truth that it is.

And, it's this claim that infuriated the Jewish leadership of the first century so that they had Jesus put to death. It's the same claim that infuriates a 21st century lady so that she wants everyone to know that she absolutely does not believe in the God who is. It's this same claim that inflames the persecution of Christians around the world even as I'm speaking.

Speaking of Jesus' claims, He made a big one in the gospel lesson we just read for the first Sunday of Advent, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. As the Jewish Passover pilgrims from Galilee were coming down the mount of Olives into Jerusalem they shouted out a verse from Psalm 118:26 typically used for the occasion. But, because Jesus was with them mounted on a donkey they changed one key word. Instead of saying "Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord," they said in Luke 19:38 "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord!" Then they added, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest."

Peace in heaven is most significant. The Old Testament teaches that Messiah had to come and die so that we might have peace with our Creator King through the forgiveness of our sins. Without forgiveness of sins, life and salvation we are in eternal conflict with our Creator – especially of the "I believe in nothing" variety.

So the people who traveled with Jesus that day saw in Him peace with God. No doubt, they would have been horrified to know that the peace would have to be bought with death on a Roman cross. But even though the thought of this did not enter their minds, they still had an expectation of peace with God through Jesus of Nazareth. And because of this they shouted out "glory in the highest." In other words, may all the divine goodness and righteousness of Almighty God be shown to human beings in peace, rather than the wrath and retribution we deserve because of our rebellion.

Now, recognizing the importance of the unexpected things the common people were saying, we read in Luke 19:39, "Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples!'" In other words, "Teacher, silence your disciples. They are saying things about you that are not true. You are just a mortal human being, like we are. You are not God."

But instead Jesus rebuked them in a very strange way. Luke 19:40, "'I tell you,' he replied, 'if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.'" Do you realize the astounding thing Jesus was saying about Himself? Only the Creator of the universe can give voice to the silent stones He has created. And if the Creator chooses to come to earth, only He can make His rocks praise Him if His people are silent. Jesus was declaring Himself to be God.

Jesus of Nazareth didn't say this thing casually. He really believed it. Normally such a statement from any human being would be a sign either of madness or of the most diabolical form of deceitful persuasion. It would be the sign of a madman or of the worst self-deceived con man who ever lived.

But Jesus of Nazareth was no ordinary mortal. When Jesus was around, lame people walked, deaf people heard, blind people saw, mute people spoke, lepers were cleansed, sick people got well and even the dead were resuscitated. However, this did not stop Jesus' dedicated opponents from calling Him a madman or liar. In the same way, if we, Jesus' servants, could consistently perform such miracles today, it would not stop those dedicated to believing in nothing from saying the same things. Indeed, if Jesus had waited to enter the world in our time instead of first century Israel, the result would still have been the same – execution at our hands for being a madman or liar. Even better, I suspect we would execute Him unless He emptied every hospital.

Therefore, it took the greatest miracle of all to confirm Jesus' words that if His disciples had kept quiet the stones would have cried out. On the third day after Jesus' untimely and unjust death, the tomb where they buried Him no longer contained a body. His dead mortal body was nowhere to be found. But, His alive, glorious, immortal human body was being seen in various places by a select group of people. Jesus let this select group touch His immortal body. He ate with them. And forty days later He was clearly seen departing this earth in His immortal body. This is the divine/human Jesus who said the rocks would cry out if His disciples remained silent. Indeed, there's a song we sing in which we're encouraged to keep the rocks silent for one more day by praising our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

When Jesus departed this earth we read this of those who saw Him go in Acts 1:9-11, "9 After he [Jesus] said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. 10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'"

This promise given to the disciples at the Ascension of Jesus into heaven is one of the very things we look forward to in the Advent season. The Palm Sunday entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is the historic text for the first Sunday of Advent. But it foreshadows His second coming, the thing we heard of last week. Indeed, there's an alternate gospel lesson for today. It's the same material we read in Mark last week. But this week it's Luke's account.

It's found in Luke 21:25-36. Luke 21:25-26, "25 [Jesus said that at His second coming] 'There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26 Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'" As we also saw in Mark, Jesus predicted that there will be a severe astronomical shakeup just prior to His second coming. It will be terrifyingly plain in both the night and day sky. Here on earth, we who live near the sea also will be absolutely terrified at what we'll be seeing. Jesus said that fear and terror would rule many hearts. The fact that we don't presently see these things is the main reason we know that Jesus' return is not imminent. But that doesn't mean we won't begin to see them tomorrow, perhaps.

We read on in Luke 21:28-31, "27 'At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 When these things begin to take

place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.' 29 He told them this parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 30 When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. 31 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.'"

Notice that with these words Jesus is comforting the Christians who will be alive as His return draws near. They are not to live in terror of what they are seeing and the destruction they are experiencing around them. Rather, Christians are to look up in eager expectation because the long awaited Kingdom of God is just months, weeks, maybe just days away.

And now we get to some incredible words in Luke 21:32-33, "32 'I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.'" What kind of person says that the present universe will pass away but His words will never pass away? Again, for saying such a thing Jesus was either a lunatic, a liar, or is Lord and Creator of this universe. What do you think?

Finally, Jesus ended His teaching in Luke 21:34-36, "34 'Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. 35 For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.'"

Apparently, the signs in the cosmos will come out of nowhere suddenly – like a sprung trap. Jesus predicted He will return at the time of the signs in the same way – unexpectedly. Therefore, He warns every Christian to take the things of God's Kingdom seriously. Otherwise, it seems that even Christians will not be ready spiritually when it all suddenly comes.

Therefore, how are we to be on watch if Jesus doesn't return in our lifetimes? How should we pray?

As we saw last week, there is a fundamental condition necessary in order to stand uncondemned before Jesus when He returns. It's to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is no lunatic or liar or a nothing. He is just who He said He is – our Messiah, true God incarnate as true man. He is the very pure goodness of God, God's full righteousness in a human body. And as such He is the template for all human beings who will stand in righteousness before God in the resurrection of the dead. This is confirmed in 1 John 3:2, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." We shall be like Him in righteousness before God. All sin and the sinful nature will be gone from us forever. Therefore, in anticipation of this destiny, the Apostle John urged us in 1 John 3:3, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

Hope in Jesus and expectation that we shall live with Him in complete righteousness for all eternity causes the believer eagerness to begin the purification process here, now. Purification happens through the gifts that the Lord Himself has given us.

God's primary gift is His Word. Faith comes by hearing God's Word. Through the commands in God's Word, we become aware of our sin, unrighteousness and

rebellion against God. Through the gospel promises in God's Word we come to trust that when we identify and confess our sin for what it is, God not only forgives it. He cleanses us from all unrighteousness so that we might have clean hearts before Him. Through faith in the Word, we also receive purification through the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

Indeed, that is what this service is all about. It's God's most gracious service to us in Word and Sacrament so that we might not perish but have everlasting righteous life in Him and with Him. It's most gracious because it totally rests upon the obedience of Jesus to the Father. It rests upon Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. As it says in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

So, if we will keep these truths deep in our hearts and live them, then the end of this world and the actual coming of the Kingdom of God will not surprise us. We will have been expecting it all along. For on that blessed Day, by the grace of the one who loved us from the beginning, we will greet He who comes on the clouds, the Messiah we have long waited for. A blessed Advent to all. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.