Anticipation

Luke 21:25-35

Murray M Cooper

November 29, 2015

Today begins the Season of Advent, a season of anticipation. But what is it we anticipate? For many of us, it is the anticipation of the birth of Jesus, a run-up to Christmas. And, that is certainly fine. That event signals a change forever in how we will live. But it anticipates more than that. Advent also anticipates Easter, the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus, an event that is the culmination of Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah and the revelation of Jesus as the Lord of creation. Yet, there is one more thing we anticipate in Advent, Jesus’ return in glory as judge of humanity and the transformation of the creation, the final consummation of the Kingdom of God.

What is it like to live in anticipation? Do we ever not live in anticipation? As a youth, I remember the excitement of the anticipation of Christmas. Looking forward to presents, Christmas dinner, and the joy of being with my extended family. But I also remember thinking, why is Christmas taking so long to get here? The anticipation almost became an agony of waiting.

As an adult, I remember the growing anticipation of the birth of my first child. There was the joy of anticipating the arrival of this new person in my life. But there were also concerns, would this child be healthy and did I know enough to be a good father? Again, anticipation as a mixture of joy and agony. Just as an aside, all of my children were born healthy and their arrival was always an event of unbelievable joy. But I was totally unprepared to be a father. I discovered that it was a learn-on-the-job endeavor.

For us, anticipation of Christmas and Easter is an anticipation of a celebration, because we are celebrating events in our past. But anticipation of the return of Christ, the Day of the Lord, is another matter, it lies in the future. Do we know what that future will bring? Do we have any idea what will transpire between now and then?

For many, if not most people, this anticipation can be filled with dread. We can anticipate what might happen in the future based on what we know now and plan for the future on that basis, but we really don’t know for sure. In fact we all, to a greater or lesser extent, dread the future. Jesus knew this and much of his ministry was meant to assure us that unimaginable joy awaits us at the return of Jesus the Christ to earth. In fact, Jesus not only prepared us for the end, but for what will transpire before the end.

Every year there are multiple predictions that this year will see the “end times.” People may base these predictions on calendar calculations derived from creative readings of the scriptures. But these predictions are just simply wrong. In the scriptures Jesus tells us, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mark 13:32, NRSV)

Or, people may base these predictions on events happening in the world. But these predictions are wrong as well, they are interpreting the wrong signs. Again, Jesus tells us, “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” (Mark 13:7-8 NRSV)

Rather, Jesus tells us in today’s reading, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” (Luke 21:25-27 NRSV) So there are signs, but signs of such a nature that we will not wonder if they predict the end time. The very fabric of the creation will be shaken. These signs are not a prediction of the end times. When they are seen, the end is here.

So there won’t be any warning of the end; that is what the scriptures tell us. So how is this to comfort our anxiety? First, if we happen to be alive when these signs occur, then we know our redemption is near. In fact we will be redeemed so quickly, in an instant, that we will scarcely be aware of the signs at all. Second, the fact that we know we will be redeemed, whether alive or dead, is a source of great joy. So we know part of the future, we will be saved. We should have no anxiety about our salvation.

It is true that until the end there will still be terrible things happening, these are the “birth pangs” mentioned in Mark 13:8. None-the-less, we should be comforted because not only will we be saved, but we are saved already. In fact we are not even waiting for the Kingdom of God, we are only waiting for its completion. The Kingdom of God arrived with the birth of Jesus Christ. True it is here now only in part, but we as the children of God, are already its citizens and capable of enjoying its benefits in part. Is this not a source of joy and a reason to not be anxious?

So what does this mean for us, right here and right now? Jesus tells us, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.” (Luke 21:34-35b NRSV) In other words, we should enjoy our lives in Christ and live as the citizens of the Kingdom. Now some might say, “Well if I’m already living in the Kingdom then I don’t need to do anything, God will provide.” This attitude has led to a criticism of the Christian “Way of Life” as unreasonable or impossible.

Its true God provides everything necessary for life, but this does not mean it gets handed to us. Even though we are citizens of the already but not yet Kingdom, we still live in this world where perfection is still a future thing. We still need to work to support ourselves and make plans for the future. But as already-citizens of the Kingdom, we know our hope for the future lies with God and his promise of salvation, not with anything we can do.

We need to take care of the business of our everyday lives, but not be consumed by anxiety for the future. We should keep our eyes on God and not start to look elsewhere for our security. Yes, money is necessary, but it is not the ultimate guarantee of our life nor is any other purely human thing. You should acquire money to live, not live to acquire money.

This leads us to another important aspect of being a citizen of the Kingdom. As with being a citizen of any country, along with the rights and privileges, come obligations. What are these obligations? They are summed up nicely in Jesus’ statement, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34 NRSV)

As citizens of the Kingdom, we are obligated to care not just for ourselves, but for all of humanity. As long as there are those who suffer and hunger, God’s will for the creation is not being met and we are complicit. The details of how we carry out this obligation is a long discussion which we need to have, but not a discussion we have time for right now. The point for right now is to know and acknowledge we have this obligation.

So, what is it we anticipate and celebrate in the season of Advent? We anticipate and celebrate the birth, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, Jesus. We anticipate and celebrate the presence of the Kingdom of God, proclaimed in Jesus Christ. We anticipate and celebrate the final consummation of that Kingdom and the perfection of the world to come.