

## “Don’t over-react!”

November 7, 2010

Text: *Psalm 145:1-9, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17*

### I.

Some time back, a visiting pastor asked a congregation in the Northeast to identify one of their hardest times as a faith community. Sometimes, memories of hard times help provide perspective on things at the present.

1. Because they were a port city, he thought they might have gone through some difficult times around the arrival of new immigrants over the years.
2. Or, perhaps they’d point to some tough days dating back to the Revolutionary War period. The British, it was reported, had burned down the church and actually shot the minister’s wife.
3. Or maybe they would recall the considerable sacrifices of hardship during the great depression in the late twenties and early thirties.

But, apparently, none of these topped the list. The congregation said that the hardest time was when, in 1843, a Millerite pastor (a follower of the eschatological teachings of William Miller) persuaded the members to give away their homes and farms, put on their white robes and wait on the hilltop for Jesus.

They waited alright ... right into what was known as *The Great Disappointment* to where, eventually—shamefaced—they had to return home and ask for their property back.

### II.

Throughout Christian history, there has always been some level of interest and fascination with the prospect of Jesus’ return. Most of us have heard of the *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. There were 16 of them, starting back in the mid-nineties. And before that, in 1970, there was *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey and Carla Carlson.

The Christian Scriptures certainly talk about a Second Coming. Again, as we say all the time in our church, what all of this hinges on is the *way* we read the Bible.

1. Do we understand biblical accounts of the *Second Coming* or, in the Old Testament, the *Day of the Lord*, in a literal sense ... or ...

2. ... in a symbolic sense, taking into consideration the historical context and the deeper meaning that gave rise to the text in the first place?

In the *United Church of Christ*, for the most part, we lean strongly toward the latter option—that much of the Bible is symbolic language which uses the hyperbole of story and metaphor to relate the deeper truths it wishes to convey.

Still, there's something about the idea of the Second Coming that draws us in.

- This *Second Coming* or, *Day of the Lord*, would spell the final victory of good over evil.
- At last, justice would pour over the earth ... the righteous faithful, of course, would all be saved.

Indeed, O what a day!

### III.

If we think about it, friends, as the great **Reinhold Niebuhr** used to say—America's greatest theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the idea of the Second Coming is rooted in the social hope of an oppressed people—of a people for whom life in this world offered little solace or promise. This certainly makes sense.

So when people ask me if I believe in the Second Coming, I say *not in any literal sense* but I believe in the power the idea of the Second Coming conveys. It conveys the power and the depths of hope.

People trapped in lives of endless oppression, servitude and misery need hope.

Often times, they have few alternatives left for a semblance of comfort and reassurance and some reason to get up every day.

Even in our own day, with all of our problems, wouldn't it be nice to tie our hopes to a new day on the other side—a new creation, a new reality ... a day when crying and mourning and injustice and unfairness would be no more? A day when everyone who wanted to work had a job, when all God's children had adequate health care and when educational opportunities existed for everyone.

One of the deeper problems, of course, with a literal interpretation of the *Second Coming*, is that—easily—it becomes a tool of manipulation and control. Think about it:

- anytime anyone predicts anything linked to a firm date, until that day actually comes, they have power.

- Once the day comes, of course, and nothing happens—which has been the case in 100% of *Second Coming* predictions, the power is gone and the movement eventually fragments.

#### IV.

In 1 Thessalonians, an authentic letter of the Apostle Paul, Paul makes clear reference to the *coming of the Lord*, the expectation that Jesus would return in their lifetime:

1. ***Now concerning the times and the seasons ... you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.***

In Mark's gospel (chapter 13)—the earliest of the four gospels—Jesus himself makes reference to such a coming:

2. ***But in those days, after the suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the power in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.***

And then Jesus goes on to assure them: ***for you do not know when the time will come.***

Thus, both Paul and Jesus (Paul in the earliest of his letters and Jesus in the earliest gospel) reveal a belief in a *Second Coming* or *Day of the Lord*. But for both, no set time is given.

Now, interestingly enough, in Paul's later letters (1 Thessalonians was his first letter to the churches) there is less and less reference to the *Second Coming* to where, in Romans, his last letter, there's no mention whatsoever—clearly, because it hadn't happened.

It's the same with the gospels. In the later gospels, there's less and less hint of Jesus' return to where—in John's gospel, the latest of the gospels—there's no mention at all.

#### V.

All of this brings us to our reading from 2 Thessalonians where the author (probably not Paul but a disciple of Paul) ... where the author, referring to the *Second Coming*, cautions the Thessalonians not to over-react.

*As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you ... don't be too quickly shaken in mind or alarmed ... thinking that the Lord is already here.*

In other words, ***don't over-react!*** 2 Thessalonians goes on to say, in effect: breathe deeply, slow it down ... remember what we taught you ... live good lives ... make good decisions ... and again, ***don't over-react!***

Isn't this a good message for us—not only here, but in all realms of our lives? To be cautious about a possible over-reaction to events and things that are said?

Over-reacting is a rushing to conclusion that is premature. We do this all the time, don't we?

## VI.

Years ago, upon learning of some event or something that was said that was in any way controversial, I developed the discipline of making myself wait 24 hours before officially reacting.

In other words, in the immediate aftermath of seeing or hearing about whatever, I'd tell myself: *slow it down ...breathe deeply ...and wait 24 hours*. I can't tell you how much grief this has saved me through the years.

So, what does this suggest to us about our lives ... and about truth and about being wise and discerning? Doesn't it tell us that much of the time we need time to reflect; time to think things through; and time to ask useful questions and seek a bigger picture of the truth.

Because, if we're not careful, we can over-react ...

1. To hearsay, for example, passed on to us by whomever ... it's not always clear what people mean in what they say ... and sometimes they were just having a bad moment or a bad day when they said it. Human communication is more than just words. Always, there's context and meaning behind the words. Easily we can over-react.
2. To an initial diagnosis of a doctor or a counselor/ therapist ... sometimes we need another opinion, a fresh look at things ... or ...
3. To the results of an election ... political scientists will never fully understand election results ... there are so many factors in play ... or ...
4. To how the church is doing. Again, so often it depends who you talk to and how accurate their information is. And sometimes it has to do with: through what lens of faith do we see the church?

## VII.

Virtually every time—in all of these realms and in all of life—we need time to see more of the BIG PICTURE. We need to make sure we have the best, most accurate information. We need to do our best to understand the context. In so much of life, context is everything.

Context is so very important because ... every human being has their own story to tell—their own lens of life-experience through which they see the world.

So, as with the Thessalonians, friends, much of the time in life, what we need to do is breathe deeply, *don't over-react* and place our trust in God ... for indeed, as the **Psalmist** reminds us:

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;  
The Lord is just in all his ways ... kind in all his doings ...  
The Lord's greatness is unsearchable.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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