

Living In Expectation - Of Pain

Matthew 24: 1-35

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This past week the Ottawa Police Services and the Halifax police set up special meetings. Notices were circulated, and invitations extended to various groups. All because of expectation.

George W. Bush is expected in our nation in the near future as a guest of the Canadian government. And with the expectation of his arrival comes a season of planning.

Diplomats expect to engage in talks over certain trade issues, as well as matters of diplomatic bridge-building as the President enters his second term in office.

Prime Minister Martin expects politicians on the Hill to behave themselves. Parish said she would - but it seems that Bush won't be addressing Parliament anyway... just in case. Not sure what to expect.

Protestors expect to confront the President, and let him know how unhappy they are with his policies and actions.

Civic officials expect they'll have a bit of a mess to clean up.

And the police - well, they expect to be very, very busy.

Everyone, it seems, is living in expectation.

As are we.

Welcome to the church season of Advent.

Advent is a term from a root word that simply means, *To Come*.

Advent is a season of expectation as we await a coming -

- not of a president, but of one greater yet.

We await the coming of the One whom we celebrated and honoured last week as the Great Cosmic King -

We await the coming of Jesus Christ.

Advent is the church season with two key themes, both built on expectation.

1. We **expect** the celebration of Jesus' first coming to earth;
the celebration of Christmas.

Advent helps us get our hearts and minds ready for that celebration with a correct spiritual focus.

2. We **expect** the return to earth of King Jesus.

That is known as the *Parousia*.

Advent helps us get our hearts and minds and bodies and lives ready for that coming, very real, but unknown final day of earthly history, the day of Cosmic Judgment, the Last Day.

Christmas and *Parousia* -

The first and second coming of King Jesus.

Are you expecting these events?

How are you getting ready for them?

What are you expecting these events to be like?

What do you expect to happen in the time leading up to them?

During the next four weeks of the Advent season we'll consider these questions. We'll search the Bible together for some answers. And we'll pray that God's Holy Spirit will shape our hearts and minds and souls, that our lives will be truly and properly prepared for Christ's coming.

This week - as we get ready to celebrate Holy Communion - we are reminded that as we live in expectation, we'd best be ready to encounter some pain.

Yes.

Live in expectation...

...of pain.

This morning's Bible instruction comes from

MATTHEW 24:1-35, P.26 (New Testament)

Jesus describes seven kinds of painful happenings that will take place before His return:

false prophets and messiahs

wars and rumours of war

famine

natural disasters

persecution

people turning away from faith

and

the love of many growing cold.

In the years since Jesus uttered those words, Christians have sometimes jumped to conclusions. The first time they see and contemplate some of these events occur, they conclude that Christ's return will happen at any moment; that it is right around the corner.

Sometimes they forget to hear and contemplate Jesus' words from verse 8 - "*all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.*"

Jesus is comparing the time before his return to the time before a pregnant woman gives birth.

There is pain to expect.

But the labour sometimes can take quite a while.

There can be twinges even weeks before, as the muscles of the uterus prepare for the birth of the baby. Those twinges may be softer or stronger, last longer or shorter. They start and they stop. Eventually, they grow and heavy labour begins - which doesn't let up until the baby arrives, and new life is celebrated.

We await the birth of the New Creation - when Jesus will return to eradicate all sin and evil and pain and incompleteness and damage from the Cosmos; when it will truly become the complete, pure reality that God conceived in the eternity before the days of Creation.

As we await that, there's going to be pain.

Just remember - the first hint of pain doesn't mean that this is necessarily **the** last moment. It may, in fact, be a time of getting ready; it may be a time of preparing.

So - we don't want to jump to immediate and definite conclusions the moment we witness pain in Creation. Don't stop living. Don't stop working. Don't stop serving the Lord. Don't get so all-consumed and preoccupied with trying to figure out clues from the Bible that surround and point to Jesus' return that you forget to do what He placed His followers here on earth to do in the first place -
to be His representatives and ambassadors
to extend His Kingly claims into every corner of the Cosmos
to bring hints and foretastes of heavenly renewal, peace, and hope into a very damaged, and sometimes hope-less world.

Martin Luther is reported to have been asked:

Martin, if you knew that Jesus were coming back tomorrow, what would you do today?
And, so the story goes, he replied:
I'd plant a tree.

In other words - keep right on living; keep right on caring for creation, interacting with other people, and doing the work that God put me on this earth to do until the day when He shows up and brings the whole business to an end.

I won't be frozen by the first hint of pain.

And there's the example for us to follow.

To keep on.

Keep on serving.

Keep on loving.

Keep on sharing Jesus.

Keep on.

That's one thing.

The other thing we don't want to do is minimize the pain that we see or witness.

Pay attention.

When you see the

false prophets and messiahs

wars and rumours of war

famine

natural disasters

persecution

people turning away from faith

and

the love of many growing cold.

when you see that, remember that Jesus **will** return.

And ask yourself -

"Can I follow Luther, and keep on living?

Or are there changes I've got to make?

And if there are, why am I waiting with making them?"

One of the things I've discovered as a pastor is that most people don't need to be told where changes need to occur in their lives. They know.

I'm sure if I asked you to write a list of the weak spots, the spiritually soft and questionable areas in your life, the zones of your behaviour that you're not so sure Jesus will be smiling towards - if you had to write them down, I'm sure you could do it.

Wouldn't surprise me, actually, if a couple of them were floating around in your mind right now.

Are they?

We know, don't we?

The trick is scrounging up enough motivation to actually work the change;

to stop listing the excuses

to quit procrastinating

and actually get to it.

What are the changes I've got to make?

And

Why am I waiting with making them?

They may be changes in my morality.
They may be changes in my spirituality.
They may be changes in my vocabulary.
They may be changes in my social activity.
Why are we waiting with making them?

Let the pain that we witness and experience remind us that life doesn't go on forever. Time won't go on forever.

There is an end coming.
Jesus is coming.

Are we ready?

The Bible gives a number of teachings surrounding the end times.
One of them is the passage we read. The teaching actually continues right into chapter 25 of Matthew. In there we encounter the questions that will be on Jesus' mind when He meets us.

What do you think he will inquire about?
Any idea?

Do you think it will be about how well we managed to figure out the time sequence of the last days?
Or when, precisely, they will occur?

Here's what chapter 25 presents as key thoughts on the mind of Him whose coming we expect:

Number 1 - is the light of our faith burning bright? Is our love alive, and our heart open towards, and our mind centred on the One who is coming? Is our faith active and alive?

Number 2 - are we effectively using the gifts, the talents, the resources and the opportunities that God the Creator has entrusted to us? Are we being good stewards for the Lord?

Number 3 - how do we treat people that we encounter who have lives filled with significant pain; how do we treat the hungry, the lonely, the sick, the prisoners, the victims of violence and injustice?

That's what will be on the mind of Jesus when we meet Him at the end of time.

So - are there changes that have to be made?

And

What's preventing us from making them?

Quite frankly - the One thing that's never really mentioned is the whole issue of timing.

And,

Distressingly, the one thing that's most often mentioned among North American Christians is the whole issue of timing.

Let me quickly say this -

In the bible there are two approaches to time.

There is **chronos** time.

And there is **kairos** time.

Chronos time deals with things in chronological order, one day or hour after the next. Today is November 28. Tomorrow is November 29. Soon it will be 12 noon - and lunch time. But before that we'll have coffee.

Those are chronological issues.

Kairos time deals with a chapter of history; the right season or moment for something to occur. Ralph Klein recently forced an election in Alberta because he felt it was the right political moment to hold a campaign. In his mind, anyway, it was the right *kairos* time - the right chapter in the political life of Alberta - for an election.

Bible Prophecy is virtually always written in Kairos time language.

Including Matthew 24. Don't spend too much time trying to bend your brain around the sequencing and dating of these events. Consider them, rather, the way you would view a mountain range. From a distance they all seem close together; one on top of the other; all just one clump.

When you get closer, you realize that, in fact, there may be many miles between one mountain and the next.

Matthew 24 is the set up for Matthew 25 and the key questions of Jesus - questions about our faith, our talents, and our compassion. It is not there to provide a roadmap.

Try to read it that way, like a roadmap, and you are guaranteed to get it wrong. Because you are misusing Scripture.

Friends,

Welcome to the season of Advent.

Jesus, the King and Judge is coming.

Are you living in expectation?