



As Though Not

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

©Rev. Joyce Shin
Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
January 21, 2018

Since I have become a parent of a high-schooler, I have noticed something that troubles me. I have noticed that too many decisions about how time should be spent in the present are dictated by the goal of getting into college, and not just any college, but the college that will set a child up for the future that he or she might want. I run into this way of thinking all too often in conversations at home. I hear about it when I talk with other parents of very busy teens. I read about it in the news, and just as any parent who feels responsible for equipping her child for success in life, I am a target.

This experience of being so caught up by the future that we are always driven toward it is a spiritual illness. It is not good for our spirit. Whatever that future is that so preoccupies us - whether it is the college of our dreams, an image of success, a level of security, a style of life, or an amount of wealth - to be so gripped by it, urgently caught up in it, will drive us further away from that to which Christ calls us.

I used to think - by which I mean even just a few months ago - that, when it comes to time, the future is what matters. I used to privilege the future, because the past and the present are always problematic, and, therefore, the Kingdom of God must certainly be in the future. I used to think that Jesus, in his preaching about the Kingdom of God, was preaching about some future state of affairs that we were supposed to strive, through hard work, to create, accomplish, realize. No doubt we would always fall short of it, but we were still supposed to try.

I used to think that we would fall short of the Kingdom of God because of our idolatrous tendencies, because we would exert ourselves more to get into a good college, to gain wealth, to glorify our family or nation than we would to create a kingdom in which there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. If only we would get our priorities straight and strive for the right things in the future, we would be living as Christ calls us.

That is what I used to think. Recently I have been challenged in my thinking. In conversation with a friend who is an Orthodox priest, who also has a daughter in high school, I was sharing with him my concern about the future-driven culture we live in, and he said to me, as though the answer were so simple, "God is in the present." God, whose name is "I am," not "I will be," is in the present. Of course, we believe God was, is and ever shall be. My friend wasn't denying this. Rather, he was questioning why the future would be privileged to the point of driving us away from the present, the present into which Jesus has come to be with us.

Our conversation was like a light bulb. It sheds light, I think, on passages such as those we read today. It helps me to understand what Jesus meant when he said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand," and what Paul meant when he counseled people to live *as though* "the present form of this world is passing away." Paul really thought that Christ was going to come a second time in his lifetime, and because this didn't happen, it has been too easy for later generations of people to dismiss some of the counsel he gave. But if we were to take seriously God's incarnation in Christ, that Christ is truly Emmanuel, "God with us," what would his counsel mean to us? What would it mean to mourn as though we were not mourning, to rejoice as though we were not rejoicing, to buy as though we did not care about owning. What would it mean to us to deal with the world as though we had no dealings with it?

How is this counsel falling on you right now? Are you gritting your teeth, hardly able to receive it, because you find it offensive? Or are you exhaling, relaxing your shoulders, letting go of some of your anxiety? Perhaps a bit of both?

Over the past few months, some of you have told me that you are no longer getting your news online or from television. A few of you have told me that you are listening to audiobooks instead of watching CNN or Fox News while on the treadmill at the gym. A number of you are taking a break from Facebook. I have heard these decisions not as withdrawals from the world, but rather as personal resolutions to care for your spirit.

It reminds me of what Saint Ignatius, the founder of the religious order of Jesuits, called “holy indifference.” By indifference, Ignatius did not mean apathy or a “who cares” attitude. Holy indifference was for him a total openness to the will and way of God. It is a trust in God’s guiding providence that is so deep that we can say, as the apostle Paul said, “If God is with us, who can be against us.”

Again, let me ask you: what does it really mean to you that in Jesus Christ God came into the world to be with us?

In his book *The Coming of God*, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann thinks deeply about this. Professor Moltmann grew up in Nazi Germany and at the age of 17 began to live through the catastrophe of the Holocaust and World War II. This experience has informed his thinking. I want to share with you an excerpt that some of you have heard before. He writes:

I am not only a theologian who is concerned with the hopes and fears of humanity on a scholarly level. I am also a survivor of “Sodom and Gomorrah.” To say this is not poetic license. . . . It is painful fact. Whenever I call up that catastrophe and descend into the dark pit of remembrance, I am overwhelmed again by fear and trembling. I am talking here about the destruction of my home city of Hamburg in the last week of July 1943. Night after night, about a thousand Royal Air Force bombers appeared over the city, and with explosive and incendiary bombs kindled a storm of fire which in east Hamburg, from Hammerbrook to Wandsbek, burnt everything living and reduced every home to rubble. During those nights and in that fire 40,000 people died. . . . Together with others belonging to my school class, I was an air force auxiliary in an anti-aircraft battery in the inner city. The battery was stationed on the Outer Alster, easily visible for aircraft, and it was completely wiped out in a hailstorm of bombs. But for some incomprehensible reason, the bomb which blew to pieces the school friend who stood beside me at the firing platform left me unscathed. I found myself in the water, clinging to a plank of wood, and was saved.

In the end, those of us who had survived made our way through the wreckage of the streets climbing over charred bodies. We were convinced that this was indeed the end, and that the war would be over in a few days. But this terrible end was followed by two other years of unending terror which destroyed the lives of millions,

including the “40,000 people murdered in the Neuengamme concentration camp near the city and about 50,000 Hamburg Jews in White Russia” (*In the End - the Beginning*, 33-34).

For the first time in his life, on that catastrophic night, Jürgen Moltmann cried out to God, “God, where are you?” He had not grown up in the church. He had never read from the bible. During his three-years as a prisoner of war, an army chaplain gave him a bible, which he read for the first time. When he came across Jesus’s cry on the cross: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” he knew that here was one who understood him and was with him.

As one who lived through the catastrophic consequences of structural sin, Professor Moltmann read the bible, seeking to understand how God responds to it. The biblical stories make it clear that God knows that human beings are quite capable of ruining the world God created by their sin, not just any sin, but by structural sin - widespread exploitation, organized tyranny, systemic injustice. Stories like the story of the

flood tell of the structural sin we are capable of. It also tells of God's promise after the flood to be patient with humanity and to allow the world to live in spite of human corruption. The story of Jesus tells of a man who, like John, proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is at hand: repent!" but who, unlike John, saw this closeness of God's kingdom not as impending judgment, but as impending presence. No longer waiting, God has come in the person of Jesus Christ, not to judge, but to be *with* humanity. So, Jesus begins his ministry, calling people to be with him. "Follow me," he says."

Then came the tragic misunderstanding. Holding onto their view that the kingdom of God was some future state of affairs in which they would be liberated from the foreign rule of the Romans, they saw Jesus as the promised Messiah, as the political liberator. But Jesus did none of the things of a liberator. What he did do was spend his days being with people. He went into the villages and lived with people. Instead of avoiding tax collectors and sinners, he accepted them and ate with them in their homes. He called his disciples to follow him, to be with him.

In all of this he proclaimed that the kingdom of God has come to them.

Could it be that, in sending Jesus to be with us, the God whose name is "I am," is no longer waiting? Could it be that by calling us to follow him, Jesus is calling us to be with him in the present? Sometimes, when I am so caught up in and driven by the desire for a future state of affairs, in which the world is more beautiful and more just and more loving, I lose the sense of Christ's presence and peace that is for us now.

You see, there is no need to privilege the future. It would be wrong-headed to do so. Yes, the past and the present are imperfect, but as long as we are the ones working for the future, there will always be more injustice, more grievances, more poverty, more catastrophe, because we are sinful. That is the tragic reality that, from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation God has already known, that Christ already knew, and that we need to come to terms with. There is a long tradition of Christian realism that counters every temptation to take a progressivist view as though we, by our efforts, can usher in the Kingdom of God. It was most clearly articulated in the 4th century by Saint Augustine, who taught that there are two kingdoms - the Kingdom of heaven and the earthly kingdom - and that the most important thing to know is that they are distinct. Giving example after example of the tragic nature of social life, Augustine wanted to make sure that Christians would never delude themselves into thinking that we can make all things right.

What, then, are we to do, if, as Jesus says, "The poor you will always have with you, . . . but you will not always have me" (Mark 14:7)? Be passive? Be fatalistic? Throw up our hands? No. Christ shows us what to do. He shows us how to be with people. We have been called by Jesus, not because Jesus thinks that, by following him, we will make all things right. Jesus calls us, because he wants us to know that, despite all things, God is fully presently with us. Amen.