



Waiting for the Day of the Lord

2 Peter 3:1-13

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This is another advent sermon. There are lots of passages to preach from for advent sermons because the idea of waiting for the fulfillment of promises is one way of expressing what the whole Bible is about. The theological term for this is eschatological. Eschatological is an important theological term because it refers to the idea that one of the characteristics of the biblical story is that it is a story which means that it has a beginning and a middle and an end and the term eschatological means that a very central aspect of the message of the Bible is that God is directing all things in history towards a very glorious end.

So the idea of advent and the idea of eschatological are kind of the same. They both mean that time is like a big conveyer belt powered by God which is moving us steadily along to the end of this world and the final state that God has been working towards which is the fullness of the kingdom of God – the consummation of God’s plan of salvation – the renewal of all things – the time when every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So advent and eschatological are really what the Bible is all about. The world is eschatological according to the Bible. The very nature of reality is advent. In the month of December we call it advent and the rest of the year we refer to it in other ways, but a fundamental aspect of reality is that we are moving through time towards the return of Christ and the end of the world and the final judgment and the final salvation of God’s people and the final destruction of the wicked. And a very important implication of all this is that if we are wise we will live in the light of the reality of the end that God has planned for the world.

So clearly there are a lot of texts one could preach on for an advent sermon. For this evening I have chosen, 2 Peter 3:1-13 because it is all about living in the light of the end of the world as the Bible teaches it.

One of the aspects of this reality is that there is a very long time between God making promises and keeping them. The first promise was made right after the fall near the beginning of time. That was a promise that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the devil. It was a promise that through Jesus Christ, God was going to destroy Satan and all the evil that goes along with him.

The whole history of the world until today has happened and while progress has been made, Satan and his followers are still active in the world and there is still a lot of evil in the world. There has been progress all the way along because God has been at work in and through his people working out his plan. A great leap forward happened when Jesus came to earth and did the foundational thing by his life, death and resurrection. He paid the penalty for sin and so defeated death and Satan and what remains is the final implementation of that victory. But it has been a long time in coming and 2000 years have gone by since Jesus' death and resurrection and still the end has not come.

That is what 2 Peter 3:1-13 is about. Peter understands that the long wait is a challenge for the faith of God's people. The long wait also gives the enemies of God and his people ammunition for their taunts. The long wait makes them bold in their rebellion against God. It strengthens their faith that the world is Godless and that they do not have to worry about Jesus coming to judge them. Peter quotes scoffers in verse 4. "They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.'"

In our days the scoffers are those who believed in a closed universe. The scoffers in our day are those who are sure that there is nothing besides the physical world. Everything just happens according to natural laws and there is no God who is above the material world and who will one day bring it to a conclusion. They restrict their worldview to the natural world and things that can be learned from the natural world without any reference to the word of God that comes from outside of the

natural world and speaks to us of a supernatural realm that can only be known through revelation. And so they say that “all things are continuing as they were from the beginning” – only they have their own idea of how the world came to be.

That is their way of understanding the world and history. There are only natural laws. There is nothing and no-one outside of the natural laws. And so they are confident that when the world comes to an end it will be through the outworking of natural laws which has something to do with the sun dying in an explosion that will be the end of our whole solar system or something like that. That is the eschatology of the scoffers. It is an eschatology of a closed system. It is an eschatology without the judgment of God at the end of it.

Peter connects this way of thinking about the world with the scoffers “following their own sinful desires.” There is no accountability in their way of understanding the world and so they “follow their own sinful desires.” They live as they please because they do not think that they will have to face God at the end of their lives.

Then Peter says something physiologically and spiritually significant and profound. He says in verses 5-7 that the scoffers “deliberately overlook” certain facts.” That is an interesting choice of words. The scoffers, who so confidently proclaim that the Lord will not come for a final judgment because the natural laws have been steadily chugging along since the beginning of the world, are deliberately overlooking certain facts. They claim to be all about the facts, but Peter is insisting that they are overlooking certain facts and they are doing that deliberately. He is telling us that they are choosing to overlook facts. Peter is making the same point here as Paul makes in Romans 1 when he says that ungodly and unrighteous men, suppress the truth.

This is what the Bible says about people who say that there is nothing but the material world and there is nothing outside of natural laws. They are deliberately overlooking the facts. They are suppressing the truth. And their motivation for doing so is so they can follow their own sinful desires.

We should not be intimidated or influenced by the scoffing of the scoffers. They scoff because they need to bolster their irrational faith that the God of the Bible does not exist because their whole way of thinking about life and the world is based on the precarious foundation of deliberately overlooking the facts. This according to Peter is the psychology of unbelief. When people view the world as a closed system and history as nothing more than the outworking of natural laws, they are deliberately overlooking certain facts.

Well what are the facts that they are deliberately overlooking? Peter tells us in verses 5-7. These verses are clear in their overall meaning and difficult in some of the details. There is no time or need to get into all the details and so I will stick with the overall meaning. In these verses Peter is saying that the foundational fact that the scoffers are deliberately overlooking is the fact that everything that exists, exists because of the word of God. In the past God, by his word, interrupted his normal way of directing the world by judging the world by the flood. The word of God is what both keeps the world in existence and will one day bring the final judgment. Verse 5 says that the heavens and the earth were formed by the word of God. Verse 6 says that the word of God brought the flood. Verse 7 says that the word of God both keeps the world in existence and has stored up in it the “day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” Some of the language is difficult, but the overall idea is clear enough.

What these verses are saying is that what the world thinks of as natural laws is really the word of God. The word of God is the cause of everything that exists. The word of God keeps everything in existence from moment to moment. And the word of God determines everything that happens in history. Normally the word of God does this in predictable ways. That is what we call natural laws. But God, by his word, brought about the flood and God, by his word, has already predicted the Day of Judgment. Peter’s point here is that the universe does not operate independently of the word of God. And that is what the scoffers deliberately overlook.

Because we are made in the image of God and because of natural revelation and in many cases also because of the revelation of the Bible,

everyone in the world knows deep down that God exists and that he directs history. But those who do not acknowledge God deliberately overlook that fact, so they can follow their own sinful desires. Peter's way of saying this is that the word of God is what keeps the world in existence and which also determines events like the flood and the final judgment. God's word usually makes things happen in regular patterns, but sometimes God through his word interrupts those patterns with incidents like the flood. The one thing the patterns are not independent of the word of God and so such because "all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" does not mean that they will continue to do so.

This is what the scoffers deliberately overlook, but Peter's point in bringing this up is to urge his readers not to overlook this fact and its implications. And he spells out some of those implications in verses 8-13. In the context, these are implications of the fact that the future is predicted in the word of God and that future will come by the word of God.

First he tells his readers not to overlook the fact that God's relationship to time is very different from our relationship to time. "[W]ith the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." The importance of this fact in the context is that there is such a long period of time between God making promises and God keeping promises so that our experience makes it seem that maybe God does not even exist and maybe his promises are just the wishful thinking of some religious people in the past. The long, long, long period between the promise and its fulfillment tempts us to think like the scoffers, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."

Advent is about waiting with expectation for the fulfillment of God's promises and one of the realities is that we have a long period of time with no sign of the fulfillment. When Jesus ascended to heaven he said he was going to return on the clouds of heaven to bring the final judgment and the culmination of salvation. It's been 2000 years and all we have to go by is this very old promise. And many over the years have concluded that the fact that it has not happened yet means that its not

going to happen. Everything will just continue on as it always has, like the scoffers thought.

Peter tells not to overlook the fact that God's relationship to time is very different from our relationship to time. What seems like a long time to us is not a long time for God. And what seems like a short time to us is not a short time for God. "[W]ith the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Peter's point is that when we are troubled by the long time since the promise of Christ's return was made, we must remember that our perception of time is very different than God's perception of time.

This has to do with God's relationship to the creation. God is above his creation. He is active in it, but he is not part of it; he transcends it. The distinction that we must keep in mind is the distinction between the creator and the creation. And one of the things that that means is that God has a very different relationship to time than we do. We are time bound creatures. God is not. God is not a creature and God is not time-bound. He stands outside of time, though he acts within time. Peter is telling us then that we must take that into account when we think of how long it has been since Jesus said that he would come again. What seems like a long time to us is not a long time for God.

Petr also tells us that there is an important reason for the long time of waiting for the return of Christ. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but his patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." One of the reasons for the 2000 years of world history since Jesus' promise to return and bring history to its appointed end, is God's patience to us. Peter addresses his reader and says that God is being patient with you. Of course, for them it was not yet two thousand years; it was less than a hundred, but it was still a long time, longer than they expected it to be. And Peter says, "Well the reason for that is that God is patient toward you."

Now you can tie your mind in knots if you try to relate this idea to the fact that for those who are lost, God's patience with them ends when they die. But the point is that one of the reasons for the long time it is taking for Jesus to return is that God is being patient, giving people the

opportunity to repent. Jesus could have come back three days before you repented, but he didn't because God was being patient with you and he showed the same patience to those who repented today. This is how we have to think about the long delay of the return of Christ. Through all that time God was being patient because he does not wish for anyone to perish but to all to come to repentance.

And what is important here is not the questions that it raises, but what it shows us about God. There are lots of things in the Bible that we do not understand. We should expect this because God is an infinite God and we are finite beings. That is why we worship God rather than greeting him as an equal. We do not have to understand everything about God and his way with the world. We are just to worship God for what he has given us to understand and here that is this wonderful truth that all this waiting has to do with the fact that God does not wish "that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

And certainly one implication of that is that we also should not wish "that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" and so be actively involved in the mission that Jesus gave to the church to make disciples of all nations. We are not all called to be missionaries in the traditional sense, but we are all called to participate in the mission in one way or another and one of the motivations to give ourselves to this task is God's desire that no one "should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

But the delay does not mean that the day will never come. That is what Peter goes on to say. Verse 10, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." Again we have some difficulties in the details, but the overall meaning is clear enough. The day of the Lord will come. It will come when we do not expect it. And it will involve the heavens passing away with a roar, the heavenly bodies being burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done on it exposed – that is exposed to God's judgment.

Now this does not mean the annihilation of the world, but a purging and transformation. But Peter is not concerned about that at this point.

What he is emphasizing is that the end will come suddenly when it is not expected, and it will involve the dissolution of heaven and earth. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and on the day of the Lord he is going to uncreate and burn up and dissolve the heavens and the earth. The scoffers will no longer be scoffing because no longer will all things be continuing as they were from the beginning of the creation. For them it will be terrifying beyond anything they could ever imagine because the earth itself and the heavens and the sun and the stars – this whole vast universe will pass away, be burned up and dissolved. There will be nothing to grab onto. There will be nowhere to hide. The very ground beneath their feet disintegrated. What a day that will be!

But Peter is addressing us. And he is not telling us to fear. He is telling us how to live in the light of this sure event that will bring history to its conclusion even though it has been a long time coming. “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved and the heavenly bodies will melt as they are burned.”

This is really the great implication of advent. The return of Christ is a longtime coming, but he will return and when he does, the universe it will be burned up and dissolved. And we must live in the light of that great reality. A term for this idea is the title of a recent book by Trevin Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*. That is what advent is about. That is what Peter is speaking about in this passage. Eschatological Discipleship. We must live in the light of the end. “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness waiting for and hastening the coming day of God.”

What Peter is saying is that we must prioritize what will matter on that day. Having lived a life of holiness and godliness will matter on the day when heaven and earth will be dissolved. What really matters now is what will matter then and that is what is to determine how we live as we wait for the coming day of God.

Now this does not mean that we should not enjoy the gifts of God of this life. It does not mean that our created life of work and play and

family and relationships is not important and significant. What it means that we must be engaged in all of life in the light of the end and that means that that we seek to live all of life in a way that is pleasing to God, but also that we do not give any of it ultimate significance in our lives. Even our family relationships are temporary in their present form. What that means that our relationship with God through Jesus is more important than any other relationship or any other thing. There are many things that are legitimately precious, but we must enjoy them as temporary blessings and prioritize what is ultimately and eternally important and that is our relationship with God. Being holy and godly involves loving other people, but it involves having God as our God and not anything else.

Now we must understand all of this in the light of the gospel. Apart from salvation in Christ, there is no loving relationship with God and there is no holiness or godliness. The gospel is the foundation of everything and what Peter is talking about is based on the salvation that Jesus has obtained for us and indeed it is the culmination of that salvation. Apart from salvation through Christ by faith apart from works, but unto holiness and godliness, the day of the Lord is the beginning of eternal punishment.

But because of the gospel Peter can tell us to live in the light of the day of God not with terror, but with anticipation and at the same time with soberness and seriousness living lives of holiness and godliness. We are to wait for and we are to hasten the coming of the day of God. The ESV Study Bible says about this, "When Christians share the gospel with others, and pray and advance the kingdom of God in other ways, they do hasten the fulfillment of God's purposes, including Christ's return."

Now Peter describes God's people as waiting for all this to happen. That is to be understood in the light of the fact that this life is good and living a long life is a blessing. The Bible says that Christians are better off when they die and go to be with Christ, but it does not suggest that we should all be wishing that we were dead. There is a tension between wanting to live a long life and wanting to be with Christ which is far better.

That applies here as well. There is a tension between the rich blessings of this life and the waiting for the day of the Lord. Waiting for the day of

the Lord is part of the longing to enter into the full enjoyment of God and the fulfillment of our salvation. It is related to the enjoyment of God now in worship and service and the desires that we have now for holiness and for the coming of God's kingdom. Waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God means hungering and thirsting for righteousness now and growing in our love for and our enjoyment of God now.

And so we have legitimate hopes and goals for this life. Waiting for the return of Christ does not mean that we do not at the same time look with hope to seeing our grandchildren or nephews and nieces grow up. What it means is that the deepest longings that we have, have to do with being in the presence of God and being completely free from the power of sin. Waiting for the new heavens and the new earth is expressed in the here and now by prioritizing the things that we will enjoy in perfection on the day when Christ returns and in the eternity that will follow – loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbors – offering our bodies as living sacrifices to God – or in other words - living holy and godly lives.

That I think is living the life of waiting – the life that advent calls us to live – or eschatological discipleship. It is living in the light of the return of Christ and longing for and striving for as much of the fullness of our salvation now as we wait for its completion in the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Table Meditation

I said that advent is not just a season before Christmas, but it is really the nature of things according to the Bible. The very nature of life is that we are moving toward the end and the message of the Bible is tied up with that reality. And one of the ways that Jesus makes this point is by including the idea of advent in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

1 Corinthians 11:26 says, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The celebration of the Lord's Supper is an advent celebration because it is proclaiming the Lord's death as we consciously wait for his return.

This shows us how central eschatology or advent is to the gospel. The gospel is about past, and it is about the present and it is about the future and so is the Lord's Supper. We remember what Jesus has done in the past. We embrace what he has done for us in the present and we look forward to the climax of what Jesus accomplished for us when he returns.

And Jesus' death for us on the cross that we remember when we celebrate the Lord's Supper is the reason that we can look towards his return and not with terror and dread. Those words in 2 Peter 3 that describe the dissolution of the creation when Jesus returns, are scary words. The solid nature of the ground beneath our feet and the predictability of the calendar give the illusion that we are somehow independent on God and so by nature we feel safe to ignore him or thumb our noses at him. One the day when Jesus returns there will be no more illusions about everything continuing on as they always have. There will only be one place of safety on that day and that will be in Christ by faith. The only way that that day will be a wonderful day rather than a horrific day is if we have received the reconciliation with God that is rooted in Jesus death. So the waiting is closely related to the salvation that Jesus obtained for us by his death.

In 2 Peter 3:1-13, the return of Christ is a serious thing, but also a welcome thing for the people of God. The exhortation is to live in the light of it, but also to do so not with fear but with hope and expectation. That is only possible through what we remember at the Lord's Supper. And the confirmation that the Lord's Supper is intended to give is the reflection Jesus' gracious concern that we wait for his return with hope and confidence that it is well with our souls.