

“Advent as Warfare: A War of Ages”
Matthew 3, Mark 1:14-15, Galatians 1:1-5
December 6, 2020 (Second Sunday of Advent)
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We have three texts to consider this morning:

- Matthew 3
- Mark 1:14-15
- Galatians 1:1-5

And as we hear those texts, one of the key questions we need to ask ourselves is: When are we? What kingdom are we in? What age are we living in right now?

With that in mind, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

First, from Matthew 3:

^{3:1} In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Next, from Mark 1:14-15:

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Finally, from Galatians 1:1-5:

^{1:1}Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Most Merciful God,

In this season of Advent, we remember that you, Jesus, are a God who comes to his people in power.

Your power was shown as you drew close to your people Israel.

Your power came to the world incarnate in your birth.

Your power will come in its fullness on the last day when you return.

And you promise us that your power also comes to your people now by your Holy Spirit.

And so, we ask you now, Christ, as we come to your word, to draw close to us in power, and shape us.

We ask, Lord Christ, that you would do this for your tender mercy’s sake.

Amen.

WHEN ARE WE?

In Matthew chapter three, John the Baptist proclaims that in his day, a shift is taking place: The Kingdom of God is at hand. The Kingdom is coming. And the Kingdom is not primarily about real estate, it is about who reigns. John the Baptist is proclaiming that the reign of God is coming into the world, and John is preparing the way.

Everything about John points to the coming judgment and deliverance of God. His clothes point back to Elijah, the prophet, his diet points back to the instruments of blessing and of curse that came with God’s past reign and judgment in Israel, and his words urge those of his generation to get ready – to live in light of the coming judgment, and the coming reign of God.

“Even now,” he says to the people, “the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And how is this reign coming? John explains in verses eleven and twelve that it is through one who is coming after him: “I baptize you with water for repentance,” John says, “but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

And then that mighty one coming after John is identified as Jesus. For in his baptism God the Father anoints Jesus with the Holy Spirit, declaring Jesus to be his Son. Jesus is the one who will bring the Kingdom of God, who will bring about the age of the reign of God.

And Jesus confirms that himself, for as Mark tells us, after John is arrested, Jesus goes out, saying: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Jesus announces that the reign of God is at hand! The age of God’s reign is arriving! This is good news.

For under the reign of God whatever is good and right will flourish, and whatever is contrary to God’s rule will be cast away into the fire.

Love for God, love for neighbor, thankful embrace of God’s good gifts, life, health, joy, peace – these things will flourish in the age of God’s reign.

Rebellion against God, hate for neighbor, greed, selfishness, oppression, injustice, sin, sickness, pain, and death – these things will be done away with in the age of God’s reign.

And Jesus tells the people as he begins his earthly ministry that God’s reign is at hand. The age to come is breaking in right then and there.

And then fast-forward about 20 years later, to the words of Paul – Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ.

Paul is writing to believers living on the other end of Jesus’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the throne. And so, does Paul tell them that they are now living in the new age – in the age of the reign of God?

Well ... no.

Instead, Paul writes:

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age.”

And we should scratch our head here. Paul tells the Galatians that they are living in “the present evil age.” The present age, he tells them – almost in passing – is evil. But how can that be? If the Kingdom of God was at hand twenty years earlier, when John preached, and if it was the coming – the arrival, the advent – of Jesus Christ that was to bring the Kingdom, and if Jesus has come, and carried out his proclamation, and has lived, and died, and rose from the dead, and ascended to the throne, then how could the Apostle Paul say that the present age is still evil? Shouldn’t we be in the age to come – the age of the reign of God?

And while the question needs to be asked ... as we look around ourselves, we of course know that Paul is right. The present age *is* evil. Rebellion against God continues. Hate is everywhere.

Greed, selfishness, oppression, injustice, sin, sickness, pain, and death – these are the realities of the age we live in.

So then, what happened to God’s reign?

And yet, even as we ask that question, we know that *something* has happened with the reign of God. After all, we are here, in his house, attending to his Word, so we can live according to his commands. What began as a group of Jews gathered at the Jordan River, in a small, relatively unimportant province of the Roman Empire, today consists of millions of people who have gathered this morning to worship the God John proclaimed, and that Jesus claimed to be. So things aren’t the same as they were before Jesus. But things don’t appear to be exactly what was promised either.

So, when are we? What age are we in? Are we living in the age of the reign of God, or the evil age of rebellion against God?

OVERLAPPING AGES

And the Bible’s answer, taken as a whole, is both. We are living in both ages. We are living, in some way, in the Kingdom of God – in the age of the reign of God – the age that is to come. But we are also living in the age of rebellion that has continued since Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden.

We are living in the age of the past rebellion. And we are living in the future age of restoration and renewal.

And, in fact, this is a dynamic that the Bible states repeatedly. It’s a reality often described by theologians as “the already-but-not-yet.” The Kingdom of God is already here ... but not yet here.

And that dynamic is not just true of the world out there – but it’s even true of our own individual salvation. The Bible repeatedly talks about our salvation as something that we have already received ... and also not yet received.

And so, in Romans 8:15 the Apostle Paul tells us we have received the Spirit of adoption: already. And then, eight verses later he writes that we still await our adoption: not yet.

In Ephesians 1:7 Paul says that we have redemption in Christ: already. And then a few chapters later, in Ephesians 4:10, he writes that we are still awaiting the day of redemption: not yet.

In Ephesians 2:6 Paul tells the believers that they have been raised with Christ: already. And then in 1 Corinthians 15:52 he tells the believers that they will be raised: not yet. [Briones]

Our salvation is both “already” and “not yet.”

In fact, the framework of already-but-not-yet is so pervasive that one theologian describes it as “the silent presupposition that lies behind all that [the New Testament] says.” [Oscar Cullman, quoted in Briones]

And, in fact, the already-but-not-yet framework is at the heart of Advent.

For, as we said last week, Advent is not only about Jesus's coming in the manger two thousand years ago. It is also about his coming on the last day, at the end of history, in power and glory, to make all things new.

And so ... Jesus has already come to earth ... and we also await his coming to the earth.

The Kingdom of God is already here, but not yet here. The age to come is already here, but not yet here. Jesus is already here, but not yet here. The fullness of our salvation is already here but not yet here. The renewal of creation is already here, but not yet here.

And as we wrestle with that, we must realize that the transition from the age of rebellion to the age of God's reign is not something that flipped like a switch, in a moment. Instead, the age of rebellion and the age of the reign of God overlap. Both are present at once.

Both were present when Jesus ascended to the throne of heaven and sent his Apostles out into the world.

Both were present when Paul spoke to the Galatians.

And both are present for us today.

We live, in some sense, in both the age of rebellion *and* the age that is to come.

Dutch theologian Herman Ridderbos puts it like this – he writes that for the Apostle Paul, “a ‘mingling of the two ages’ takes place and [...] the advent of Christ is to be viewed as the ‘breaking through of the future aeon in the present.’” [Ridderbos, 53; See also Vos, 38]

The Bible calls us to hold-on to two realities of the time we live in: the presence of the age of sin and rebellion, and the presence of the age of the reign of God.

But we often get this wrong. We often mess this up. We often hold onto one, and we let go of the other.

And Christians tend to do this, but non-Christians have a secular form of it as well.

And in either case we might refer to the two mistakes we can make as having either an over-realized eschatology, or an under-realized eschatology.

What do I mean by that?

Well, eschatology is the study of “last things.” It is the study of our eternal destiny as human beings – our goal, the purpose that history is moving towards. And most people, Christian or non-Christian, whether they realize it or not, whether they admit it or not, they have an eschatology. They have a destination that they believe history and human life should be moving towards – a goal for “the way things are supposed to be.” And that picture of what they think things will be, or at least, should be, is their “eschatology.”

But the truth is that most human beings either tend to assume that we have already essentially arrived at our future goal *or* they tend to think our lives now have little to do with that final goal.

Let me explain what I mean.

OVER-REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

So first, many people have an over-realized eschatology.

What I mean is that many people think that the kingdom of all that is good in principle is already here, and in practice both can and should be here in its fullness today.

One major form of this in our secular culture is, as was mentioned recently, what C. S. Lewis describes as “chronological snobbery.” [Lewis, 113]

Most people today, in our secular culture, when they speak of right and wrong, or what things should be like, actually speak in terms of eschatology: they speak in terms of *when* we are – in terms of the age we are living in. And most people do this without even realizing it.

Charles Taylor points out how this so undergirds our thinking that it shows up in our everyday language. He writes: “we say that X isn’t living in our century, that Y has a ‘medieval’ mind, while Z, whom we admire, is way ahead of her time.” / “In other words, our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there.” [Taylor, 29]

In other words, when people today speak of moral expectations, they talk about *when* we are. They speak of where we are in the story of history.

And frequently the story we tell ourselves is: “We’re no longer in that backwards age, we are now in an age where good has been, and should be, embraced.”

We imply that every time we say something like: “How can they believe that? How can they say that? How can they do that? How can they allow that? *Don’t they know it’s the 21st century?!*”

When that sentiment is spoken or felt, there is a story – there is an eschatological perspective underneath it: “The world had been in an age of oppression and backwardness. But now we are in an age of enlightenment and love. Get with the program!”

This new age of goodness has arrived. It’s here. ... But some people have not gotten the memo. Some people are not with the program.

And from this perspective, these people don’t represent normal division, or reasonable disagreement, or a sign that maybe we are all not so enlightened ... they are simply behind. They are clinging to the past. They are on the wrong side of history.

And they are not so much seen as needing engagement, as needing to be sidelined and overcome.

It's this concept of history – this concept of morality – this concept of eschatology – that lies behind what so often gets discussed as “cancel culture.”

If you say or do something contrary to the moral order of this new age, then you are not heard, you're not engaged, you're not persuaded, or even rehabilitated. You're cancelled. You're excluded. Because you should know better. Because it's the 21st century. And there is no place for those who still follow the ways of the past age. And there is little hope for you to grow if you haven't already.

This concept of history, morality, and eschatology also lies behind the tendency to culture war rather than civil discourse. If the battle is one of eschatology – if it is those living in the new age of enlightenment dealing with those who insist on the old ways of darkness, then there is no discourse to have. All there is is pushing back and overcoming the ways of the old broken age. When the issue is for the triumph of the good over evil, you don't have a roundtable discussion. You fight. It's about eschatology, not public policy.

Or so this way of thinking in our secular culture often goes.

It has at least two problems.

For one, it assumes what the Kingdom to Come is like. And it often draws that picture from its own opinions and desires, instead of from the God who will bring that Kingdom about.

But along with that, it assumes an over-realized eschatology. It assumes we have arrived already in principle and we should have arrived already in practice. And so anyone who is not already there – anyone who has not already embraced the ways of the new era, must simply be cast aside.

There is very little patience for those who struggle to think and live fully in-line with the new order of things.

That is what secular over-realized eschatology looks like.

And before we Christians shake our head at it too much, we need to stop and see our own tendency towards an over-realized eschatology.

Because while we do, rightly, start with Jesus, we often fall into the same mistaken pattern of an over-realized eschatology ourselves.

The Kingdom has come, we reason. Jesus has come into the world. He has saved us. He has made us new. We are born again. And so we who have received so much should have our acts together!

The New Kingdom has come, and Christians should live like it is so. ... And in light of that conviction, we may have very little patience for those who struggle to think and to live fully in line with the New Kingdom of Christ.

We quickly become frustrated, and impatient, and then we doubt the reality of the faith of any who are struggling.

It could come out in how we think and feel about a Christian friend ... or a spouse ... or a parent ... or someone we are trying to minister to ... or someone whom we look up to ... or it could come out in how we feel about ourselves.

Maybe it comes up because that person screws up big time. Or maybe it comes up because that person keeps screwing up in the same way, over and over again. And we look at them. And we want to say. "Look at all you've been given! Look what Jesus has done for you! You're supposed to be born again! You're supposed to be a new creation! Maybe you're not really a believer after all! Because it seems like if you were, then you'd have your act together by now!"

Maybe that's how we feel about someone we know. Maybe that's how we feel about ourselves. Or maybe that's how we feel about the whole church.

We look at the church, whether on a large scale of a the global church, or a denomination, or a theological tradition ... or on the smaller scale of our own individual congregation, and the fact is that the more we see ... the more we get to know it ... the more we get to know the people ... the more we get to know the culture of the church ... the more problems we see. The more disappointed we become. And we think: "*This* is the bride of Christ? *This* is the new humanity established by God? *This* is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God? Surely not ... surely something is deeply wrong here ..." and we consider pulling back.

And so we leave one theological tradition for another ... or one denomination for another ... or one congregation for another ... and we arrive somewhere new and we think "Now *these people* are serious about the Kingdom of God ... *these people* are living out the gospel ..." and we are encouraged ... until we get to know them better. And then the pattern repeats itself.

Maybe we are appalled at the church because she is so lax and lethargic, and so many in here continue to struggle with sins of pleasure or indulgence. Or maybe we are appalled at the church because she is so prideful and judgmental, and so many in her continue to struggle with sins of moralism or Phariseism.

But either way we are appalled and disappointed. And we find ourselves saying: "Surely if the Kingdom has come, then the People of God shouldn't be struggling like this."

What does this pattern look like for you?

What sins – whether sins of pleasure or sins of pride – do you tend to believe should be abolished by now if the Kingdom of God has come in Jesus?

And which Christians do you tend to look at, and doubt their faith because they haven't already gotten their act together in those ways? Is it your family? Is it your friends? Is it your church? Is it yourself?

Whoever it may be for you, each of these patterns grows from an over-realized eschatology. It grows from a belief that the new age has arrived in fullness, and the battle should be over, and a new day should already be here.

It grows from hearing Jesus when he tells us that the Kingdom is at hand ... but then stopping up our ears when Paul tells us that we still live in the present evil age. It grows from hearing Paul

tell us that God's people have already been sanctified [1 Corinthians 1:2] but then stopping up our ears when he tells us that we still need to be sanctified further [1 Thessalonians 5:23-24].

And Advent, pointing to the fact that Christ *has come* and that Christ is also *yet to come*, is a proclamation that while the Kingdom of God – while the reign of the Lord – has come ... it also still is to come.

It is a proclamation of the already-but-not-yet – that as much as we do live under the reign of God, we also still live in the present evil age.

And so while we must affirm the first part of that, we must not jettison the second. We must reject an over-realized eschatology in all its forms. We have not yet arrived.

UNDER-REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

But then, even as we recognize that, we must be careful not to swing in the other direction. We must be careful also to reject an under-realized eschatology.

Because as we reject one error, it can be very tempting to swing in the direction of the other.

We see this, for example, in the secular world when idealism is overcome by cynicism. Someone tries to fight for what is right. Someone tries to bring to bear the way they know things ought to be. But it doesn't happen. It doesn't work. Or it happens, but is not nearly what they thought it would be. And in discouragement and in frustration they throw up their hands. And they say, "Fine – so be it. The world is a mess. What's the point of fighting it? We might as well give up, and just take care of ourselves – just enjoy ourselves as best we can in this life."

It's a common mindset.

And there is a Christian version of it as well.

We might adopt this mindset with ourselves. We look at our lives, and we see how far we have to go spiritually – how far we fall short. And we say: "Why bother even trying to grow? I'll be a sinner until I go to be with the Lord, and then I'll be made perfect ... so why struggle now? Why not just do the minimum I've got to to get into heaven ... and accept that this life – this age – is a wash?"

Or we might do it with others. We effectively give up on them. "People don't really change" we decide. We shrug it off. We let them be. We give up hope for them. We stop urging them on to what is right.

Or we do it with the Church. The Church in general, or our church in particular, has so many issues, so why try to fix it, we say. What's the point?

Or we do it with the world: Look at what a mess the world is! Why bother fighting for justice or righteousness? Why bother trying to help the poor? Why bother evangelizing? The world is a mess. It's all going to hell. Let's just pull back and let it.

We are tempted to embrace the idea that this present age is just evil – it's evil in our hearts, it's evil in the hearts of others, it's evil in the churches, it's evil in the world. And that's that.

But ... of course ... that's not that. That's not the whole picture.

Because John the Baptist announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand. And in the first coming of Jesus Christ: in his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection, the Kingdom of God has come. The new age – the age of the reign of God has arrived.

THE WAR OF AGES

The present evil age, and the glorious age to come are both here.

But they are not just two static ages that sit side-by side. And they do not just peacefully blend together. In fact, they are not at peace at all. They are at war.

The future age *has invaded* the present age. And it is pressing this present evil age back, even while the present age tries to fight against it.

Christ brought the age to come into this present age [Briones], but he didn't just drop it off. He won for it a decisive victory. He invaded the present evil age, and in the victory of his life and resurrection, he established the kingdom to come in this world, and he has already ensured its final victory. And so now, while the battle is not over, while the war continues to rage on, the final victory of the age to come is assured.

Oscar Cullman, in an illustration many of you have probably heard before, compares the time we find ourselves in today to the time between D-day and V-day in World War II. At D-day, the crucial victory was won, and the final victory in Europe was assured. But it would still be almost a year before V-day – before the day when the Axis powers would have completely surrendered. And so, soldiers in that eleven-month span found themselves fighting a war where the future victory was assured, but not yet realized.

In Christ's first coming, victory has been assured – it has been assured that the Kingdom of God – the age of the reign of God – will be victorious. But the victory is not yet realized. And much battle still remains. [Hoekema, 21]

And yet we can now fight with a confident and assured hope that in Christ, the age to come – the Kingdom of God – will triumph completely over this present evil age.

THE REASON FOR OUR HOPE

But even as we say that, we might find ourselves wondering: how is this Christian confidence for the future any different from the secular chronological snobbery we dismissed earlier?

And the answer is that what makes it different is what it is rooted in.

Chronological snobbery is ultimately rooted in us. It is rooted in a confidence in ourselves – a belief that *we* or *our people* will bring about the new and right ordering of the world.

But Christian confidence is rooted not in us, but in Jesus Christ and his coming – his advent.

Our confident hope is anchored in the first advent of Christ, when he invaded this fallen world, revealed himself to his people, died for our sin, and rose from the dead, conquering sin, death, and the devil.

Our confident hope is tied firmly to the final coming of Christ, when he will make all things new, completing what he started in his first coming, eliminating sin, death, and the devil forever, making all things new, and dwelling with his people forever, as they are free from all sin and brokenness with him.

And our confident hope operates here and now based on the conviction that even now Christ is at work. He comes to his people. By the Holy Spirit, by his Word, in and through his Body the Church, Christ is at work in the world. And so it is not primarily us at work, but him.

And so, despite the proclamations of the unbelieving world, we can have confidence that it is not we who are on the wrong side of history, but anyone who rejects Christ.

Christ, in his final coming, ensures the victory for the Kingdom of God – and not just an eternal kingdom of our own devising, but a Kingdom of the God who has revealed himself in the Christian Scriptures. Christ will come. And Christ will reign. And all will be as it was meant to be. The present evil age will be done away for good, and the age of God's reign will continue forever.

And confident of that sure end – confident of the victory that will come from Christ's final advent, we can engage in the battle today.

We do not set down our spiritual weapons either out of a false assumption that the battle is already over, or out of a false assumption that the battle is pointless. But we fight for holiness in our own lives, we minister to others to encourage them to faithfulness in their lives, we pour ourselves out so that the church may grow in love for God and love for one another, and we risk our comfort and our reputation in order to call others out from the world and into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

And as we do that, we do not expect the battle to be won in a moment, or in a day, or even in a lifetime. But we fight on, confident that the battle will be won – that the future will continue to invade the present, until Christ returns, and until “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” [Habakkuk 2:14]

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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