

Living in Expectancy, Living in the Fulfilled Now

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The end of the world has been much with us of late. Last year we had Harold Camping's multiple and shifting predictions of apocalypse. And this year, as we all know, matters are very dire indeed as the Mayan calendar comes to a close with 2012. It's possible to cast an ironic glance at these periodic eruptions of apocalyptic fervor and chuckle at all this foolishness—that is until we remember that proclamations about the imminent end of the world are found in our own scriptures. Paul and even Jesus expected the world to end in their time. In our scripture reading for today, we have St. Paul writing,

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

And our Gospel reading for today begins with Jesus preaching the coming of the kingdom: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" These are the very first words we hear from Jesus in Mark's gospel; with these words Jesus launches his public ministry. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near."

We enlightened sophisticates who sneer derisively at Harold Camping, would we have done likewise if we had heard the preaching of Jesus and St. Paul? Would we have classified them as a couple of radical nutjobs and moved on with our mundane lives? Like it or not, we Christians must face up to the awkward fact that our tradition begins with the preaching of Jesus and Paul whose understanding of time was dramatically different from our own. They lived their lives with a sense that time itself was about to undergo a radical alteration. They lived with a vital expectancy that the end of the world was drawing near. What are contemporary Christians supposed to make of Jesus's preaching that time is fulfilled.

To begin with, let us ask ourselves the following questions: How do we make sense of time? Just what is our own sense of time? Now, it would be hard to say that we all share a single sense of time, but to a very great extent, I think our experience of time is most heavily shaped by our work lives. So, our dominant sense of time is that time is something to be managed. "Time management" is one of the buzzwords of our era. Time is something to be carefully organized and billed, if at all possible, in 15-minute increments. Time is money—yet another mantra that shapes our lives. Increasingly, a capitalist frame shapes our temporal imagination. Within that framework, a thing, anything whatsoever, has meaning only if it can be monetized. What cannot be converted into money is worthless. Time too comes under the tyranny of this logic. Time is well spent if time yields wealth.

To fall captive to time as a commodity to be managed and monetized is to be bound by relentless frenzy. No moment is a moment of dwelling. We pass through each moment on the

way to the next—some other appointment, some other client, some other meeting, some other deadline. We who seek to manage time, much to our surprise and disappointment, find that time is managing us. When we seek to master time, time overmasters us.

Frustrated by our enslavement to clock time, we find ourselves wondering if there is any other way of being in time. And such wondering is vital and unavoidable. After all, we are, so far as we know, the only creatures who know that our time is limited. We know—though we can rarely bear to dwell on it—that our time is a being toward death. But even this thought—the reality of death’s approach—most often throws us back into thinking about efficiency and time management, of making the most of how we “spend” our limited time. Stolen time, lost time, time managed and time mismanaged—in these and other ways, we dwell under the tyranny of time.

In popular culture, the only source of resistance to our sense of time as a commodity to be managed, of time as money, comes from our Buddhist friends. Buddhists are making some headway in teaching us to savor the present moment. Resisting the frenzy of busyness, resisting the urge to surge ahead from one moment to the next, resisting the sense that our personal worth, if not our net worth, hinges on how we “spend our time,” our Buddhist friends gently suggest that any moment in which we are too frenetic to be aware of the coming and going of our passing breath is diminished and impoverished time.

But is it even possible to hear what our Buddhist friends are trying to tell us without freaking out? “Oh, gosh, I am so bad at being mindful; what a bad student of Buddhist wisdom I am!” Tragically, even Buddhist wisdom is too easily consumed and domesticated by our ordinary ways of being in time. Even mindfulness can be reduced to a tool for greater productivity and efficiency at work, a means to help us toil longer. In these ways we risk corrupting even mindfulness, rendering it into a tool for enhancing “time management.”

Buddhists and researchers who study the brains of meditators tell us that when we live in frenzied time, our brains are constantly in a fight or flight mode. On Science Friday just this past week, the Oxford University clinical psychologist, Mark Williams reported on neuroscience research which indicates that a person who is constantly on the run, moving in a frantic rush from one thing to another, has an amygdala—the part of the brain that controls our fight or flight response—that is in a state of constant hyperactivity. In such persons—and I fear that I am often among them—their experience of life is radically diminished. What feels like busyness and productivity is anything but. Rather it is a violation of our spirit and our capacity for creativity. We remain instead in a state of perpetual crisis.

Buddhist practice invites us to enhance our capacity for attention because attention is the root and wellspring of both insight and compassion. When we cultivate our capacity for mindfulness, we come to a deepening awareness of the addictive patterns that drive our reactive behavior. Such attentiveness generates in us a freedom from craving, hatred and delusion and begins to birth in us a deeper measure of freedom from habit and reactivity. And freedom from habit and reactivity makes us capable of response-ability. No longer driven by our reactions, we are able to respond with insight and skill to what is really going on in this present moment. Ultimately, deepening our capacity to dwell in the present moment rather than passing through it enlarges our capacities for empathy and compassion. You cannot listen and love if you are always and at all times just passing through.

Having learned from our friends and neighbors about a Buddhist orientation to time, we might well ask, “Is there a distinctively Christian approach to time?” Is there a Christian alternative to the rat race, a Christian way of imagining and ordering time that is capable of

resisting our contemporary captivity to capitalist time? The short answer is yes. To be a Christian is to live in a posture of perpetual expectancy. The Christian is called to long for the kingdom of God that is always breaking into and overturning captivity of clock time, the time of business as usual. To be Christian is to live and love as though the “present form of this world is passing away.” It is to surrender attachment to *chronos* for *kairos*, the time of God’s coming.

I suspect many of you are wondering whether I am inviting you to become disciples of Harold Camping and his apocalyptic followers. I assure you I am not. The Christian is not called to wait in passive indifference for God to violently rupture the world of ordinary time, wreak vengeance on whomever we happen to classify as our enemies, and bring history to a close. On the contrary, to be Christian is to participate actively in the new world that is always already breaking in. *The Christian waits not for the end of time but for the fulfillment of time.*

Jesus and Paul called for a radical reorientation of values because they believed that the present form of the world was passing away. Both urged those who would follow to live as though the world that is yet to come is now *already here*. Theirs was not a call to indifference, passivity or despair but an invitation to risk living as though we are already citizens of the coming kingdom. Their charge: Live as though you are already part of God’s coming kingdom. Surrender your attachment to the world as it now is. Put aside its distorted values. Join in the work of casting out demons, healing the sick, welcoming the sinner, and loving neighbor and stranger because that’s what God’s coming kingdom is like. The coming of that kingdom is the meaning of time!

In our Gospel reading for the day, immediately after Jesus proclaims the coming of God’s kingdom, Jesus invites disciples to join in his work of proclaiming and enacting the coming kingdom.

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

To his would be disciples, Jesus says there is a new world coming. Give up your day jobs and follow me and let us invite people to become citizens of God’s realm. Let us fish for people who stand ready to enter the new world that is even now coming into being!

The call of Jesus to enter that kingdom resounds throughout history and can be still heard today. To be a member of the church is to have entered into a community that seeks to live into the new kingdom that is coming. To live with a Christian sense of time is to live with an enduring sense of expectation. Expectation of what? We live at every moment with a sense that God’s justice is breaking into our lives and into the world. In our lives, we prepare to celebrate the wedding banquet at which Jesus the Christ is the Bridegroom. The coming of God’s kingdom is, after all, Gospel, Good News but most especially for those who stand on the underside of the political and economic orders of the world that is now passing away.

How did Jesus announce and perform the coming kingdom? He heals the sick, he forgives sinners, he dines with the despised—the tax collectors and the prostitutes. He has little to say for those who care for propriety and conventional etiquette. His word is barely heard or received as good news by those who already enjoy respectability, power and privilege in the present and passing age. On the contrary, for the good and the respectable sorts, everything Jesus does is scandalous. We read in Mark 2:

As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. 15 And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his

disciples—for there were many who followed him. 16 When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." 18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 19 Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

The breaking in of God's kingdom leads not to despair or indifference but rather to a life of radical inclusion and celebration. His call comes to those who are despised and rejected, broken and impoverished. He comes to those of us who are prepared to acknowledge our desperate need for healing, those of us who are undone by our own fragility and fallibility. He comes to those who know all too well that we are not whole! He comes to console those who feel all too keenly our own failures and inadequacies, our own hard-heartedness and indifference to our neighbors. There is a world coming for people such as us who know our failures all too intimately and long for new life, for New Being. Tragically, this physician has little to offer to those who perceive in themselves no need for healing. This bridegroom will not forcibly conscript you to sit at a table that is set for all the wrong people, the people with whom the respectable people will not deign to associate.

To be a Christian is to live looking forward to the time of love's arrival, a love that does not care what you look like or the gender of the person you happen to sleep with. The Christian posture toward time is one of anticipation and readiness for that coming kingdom. Christians are a people who are getting ready for the train that's coming. It is a train for the brokenhearted, a train for the oppressed, a train for those who feel like their chances for a meaningful life of dignity and respect are passing away, a train for those battered by recession, a train for human beings classified as "illegal," a train for those maligned, those said to deserve their poverty because for them work is a supposedly a "strange and alien concept." The Christian lives in the time of expectation, waiting for the train to Jordan, the train to the Promised Land.

The coming of the kingdom takes place whenever justice breaks out in the world contrary to all reasonable expectation. The kingdom breaks into and overturns ordinary time when a little brown man in a loincloth leads a nation to Independence against the might of the British Empire. It breaks into history when Black South Africans rise up against the legalized cruelty of apartheid and win for themselves their freedom. The kingdom of God breaks into history when young blacks, led by James Lawson, Diane Nash and others, sit in nonviolent protest at Nashville lunch counters and work to overcome brutalizing segregation. And that kingdom is breaking in even now when the OWS movement rises up to protest income inequality and the buying and selling of American democracy to the highest bidder.

But is it possible to sustain this attitude of courageous expectation if we cannot believe in a literal and final interruption of the historical order? I, for one, cannot believe that history will be rolled up like a scroll in final acts of fire, fury and destruction. I cannot believe that the Lord of love will inflict his vindictive righteousness on those whom I deem my enemies and violently overturn the present order. But I do nonetheless long for the coming of God's kingdom. I long for the day when the lion shall lie down with the lamb and justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. I do not just long for that day; I believe that day has come, is coming and will yet come.

Christians can sustain a posture of enduring expectation so long as we believe that the goal of history, the purpose of history, is the kingdom of God. We need not believe—we must not believe that the kingdom of God comes only in the last or final moment of history and so sit idly by. We are called by the Gospel to adopt a stance that is far more radical and risky: Christ invites us not only to believe that every moment of history is open to the power of God’s kingdom but to live out that belief in concrete actions of justice making and reconciliation even if the cross awaits us. This is why living out the Good News is dangerous and terrifying: to believe in the kingdom is to give our lives over to the kingdom. To believe is to have the courage of Peter and Andrew. A strange man, largely unknown to them, stops by the lake where they ply their trade as fishermen. He cryptically invites them to become fishers of people and they stop what they are doing and follow. They leave the time of ordinary living and working and give their lives over to the time of the kingdom, the time of prophetic expectation.

Just what is the time of prophetic expectation? One might think that prophetic expectation tilts the focus of Christian experience toward the future whereas, by contrast, Buddhist mindfulness calls us to attend to the present. But matters are not so simple. Something very subtle is at work here in the Christian longing for the kingdom of God. True, Christians are called to hope that tomorrow will be no mere repetition of today. But this sense of expectation and longing is a posture that can be enjoyed and sustained only in the present. One can only live with expectation in the present not in the future. We confess that the kingdom of God is at hand and even now is. We must live with a sense of *expectancy in the now* lest we find that we inadvertently become members of Stephen Colbert’s Super-Pac, “Citizens for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow.” Strangely, Christian longing makes us into a community that longs to work for a better tomorrow today! We live into a coming future today, in this very moment, this moment of decision. The time of expectant longing is this very present moment as it is grasped and broken open by the power of God.

One final question: are we Christians obliged to choose a Christian orientation to time over against a Buddhist one? Must we refuse one for the other? The experience of many, even in this church, leads us to say no for without practices of Buddhist mindfulness many of us would not have won our freedom from the tyranny of capitalist time. Many of us have been able to free ourselves from the treadmill of time management, of commodifying time as money, only by investing ourselves, however intermittently, in Buddhist practice that frees us from unsustainable frenzy. The gentle call of our Buddhist brothers and sisters has taught us to receive each moment of our lives as a precious sacramental moment. We are learning from them how to taste our food, attend to the rising and falling of each breath, and enter into a deeper attentiveness which is the ground of all true compassion. We are taught to experience the present as a fulfilled and fulfilling eternal now. After all, those who are unable to pay attention cannot listen in empathy to the suffering of our neighbors. For these reasons, we Christians must continue to apprentice ourselves to those who have opted out of the rat race so that we might be truly human with and for each other.

But have we any gift that we might offer Buddhists in return? That remains to be seen. We cannot give what we have not yet learned to embody. But it may be possible for us to commend to fellow pilgrims of other faiths a life of hopeful expectation for the coming of God’s kingdom. We may be able to lure our neighbors in love to share our longing for and confidence in the coming of God’s beloved community. Such noble longing, waiting, praying and working for justice is a gift of Good News that we can give away, a gift that others will gladly receive.

People get ready, there's a train a comin. It's a train to a new world that is God's very own. It's a train leads us to a Jordan marked by radical justice and compassion, a world in which the poor and the lowly are not trodden underfoot by the indifferent. There is a world that is being born in which love is the first, foremost and final word. Let us pray for the courage to board that train and enter that world.