

“The Fullness of Time”

Galatians 4:1-7

11.28.21

Introduction

Have you ever known anyone whose name is on a transplant list? It is a nerve-wracking experience filled with a mixture of emotions. Sometimes feelings of hope. Sometimes feelings of despair.

When a person’s name goes on a transplant list, there are no promises—only possibilities. Not only is there uncertainty about whether a donor will become available, but the timing of when it might become available is completely unpredictable.

Receiving a transplant isn’t like other surgeries where it is planned months in advanced. Instead, the possibility of receiving an organ donation must be placed at that the top of the list, and one has to always be ready to lie down on the operating table.

As I thought about different analogies I could use for the season of Advent, this metaphor was the one that kept coming to mind. Before the birth of Christ, the people of God were filled with a mixture of hope and despair. Hope that things would change, and despair that they would forever live under the yoke of bondage and oppression.

Their expectations of who the Messiah would be and what he would do is certainly much less clear than we often assume. And perhaps most importantly, if the people of God were unsure whether God would intervene on their behalf, they certainly had no idea when it might happen. Although they lived beneath the shadow of darkness and hopeless, they were invited by the prophets of God to be ready at any moment for God to step in and bring healing to their land.

Digging Deeper

In Galatians chapter four, Paul talks about the Advent of Christ, saying, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son...” If I understand Paul correctly, there was a precise day and hour designated for Christ to be born. Like a game of chess, all the different pieces needed to be in the right place. All of human history had been leading up to that very moment.

I would venture to say that from a human perspective, the timing and method of God’s plan of salvation did not make a lot of sense. Although messianic expectations varied greatly in ancient Israel, no one expected the chosen one to be born into a family of Galilean peasants. No one expected him to grow up and be executed by the Romans on a cross. God’s timing and God’s method for bringing salvation clearly did not make a whole lot of sense; and yet, Paul tells us that this is the strategy that God employed to bring us into a right relationship with God.

Paul tells us that the birth of Christ signals a clear change in the history of salvation. Previously, the Law of Moses, along with other moral instruction, had served humanity somewhat as a babysitter. There’s nothing wrong with a babysitter, but God wanted us to be more than well adjusted people who could follow a set of rules. God wanted to transform our lives, which is something that can only happen through a relationship.

Listen carefully to the different terms Paul uses in this passage: adoption, children, Abba, and heirs. When we read the Gospels, we discover that Jesus routinely referred to God as “Abba,” which is Aramaic for something like “father dearest.” It was a term of endearment that a child would use for their father, perhaps equivalent to something we might hear today like “dad” or “daddy.”

There are some biblical scholars who are convinced that this term for God was uniquely used by Jesus. Even if there were others from the same time period who called God “Abba,” it is safe to say that it was not common. This term seems to capture the intimate relationship that Jesus had with God.

So, what is Paul saying? He is saying that Christ came to break down the barriers that separate us from God and change the nature of our relationship with God. Instead of God functioning as some kind of cosmic babysitter who keeps us out of trouble, Paul is claiming that Jesus came to make it possible for us to have the same relationship with God that he enjoyed.

Through Christ we become adopted into the family as children. We are co-heirs with Christ, and we share in the family blessings. Through the power of God’s Holy Spirit, we too can call God “Abba” just like Jesus.

The when, how, and why of the Messiah’s first advent was nothing like what the people of God were expecting. The “fullness of time” brought about a different kind of salvation than they were anticipating.

Theological Reflection

I can remember when I first became familiar with the lectionary. I thought it was so strange that during the month of December we were reading passages about John the Baptizer calling the religious folks to repentance, as well as the passages that include Jesus’ apocalyptic teaching and his predictions of the future. These texts certainly do not feel very “Christmasy.”

But the season of Advent is not so much to prepare us for the birth of Christ. After all, that already happened two thousand years ago. The season of Advent is to prepare us for Christ’s second coming.

The stories and passages that we read during this season simply take us back to the feelings of both hope and despair felt by the people of Israel. During this season we live beneath the shadow of darkness and yet we continue to listen to the voices of the prophets who call us to live with constant anticipation that God is going to bring redemption to the earth.

When we read the New Testament we discover that the earliest Christians were expecting Christ’s return to be imminent (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). In fact, the latest writing of the New Testament, which was probably written in the early part of the second century, cautions Christians not to give up hope for Christ’s return (2 Peter 3:3-9). I wonder what apostles would think if they knew that Jesus had still not made a visible appearance two thousand years later.

Should we give up hope that one day the lion will lay down next to the lamb? Should we forget about the prophetic vision that swords would be beaten into plowshares? Are we naïve to think that Christ will really come again and make all things new?

I suspect, that like the saints of old, our expectations about Christ's second advent probably miss the mark. Maybe Christ's return won't happen when, how, or why we have often believed or assumed.

I have heard some scholars offer alternative theories, suggesting that Christ returns every time we celebrate Holy Communion, as well as every Christmas season when Christ is born within us anew. While I think both of these are beautiful and true, I also think they are incomplete.

I don't know when it will happen or how it will happen, but in the **fullness of time**, Christ will come again to make all things new. As co-heirs with Christ, we give witness to this hope when we live like children of God in the same manner as Jesus, by crying out by the power of God's Holy Spirit, "Abba, father."

Like someone on a transplant list, God calls us to live every day as if it could be **the** day. Are you ready? Are you waiting? Are you living in anticipation for Christ's return? That's what the season of Advent is all about.

Reference Tools

Borg, Marcus. *Reading the Bible Again for the First the First Time*. 2001. New York: Harper Collins.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistle to the Galatians*. 1993. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Witherington III, Ben. *The Christology of Jesus*. 1990. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your favorite holiday?
2. As you reflect on this week's message, what one thought stands out as being particularly helpful, insightful, or difficult to grasp?
3. According to Paul, Christ came so that we could enjoy the same kind of relationship he had with God the father. What do you think this is meant to look like in our daily lives? How did Jesus model this relationship for us?
4. If Advent is a season that helps us prepare for Christ's second coming, what should we be doing to be ready? How can we move from despair to hope? How can we be witnesses of God's promises?
5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?

6. How can we pray for you?