

Does Anyone Really Know What Time It Is?

Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44, Psalm 122

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Imagine

There seems to be a little tension between the Epistle and the Gospel readings. Imagine that—Jesus and Paul on different pages. Paul thinks he knows what time it is, while Jesus is pretty sure nobody really knows, not even, wink, wink, the Son of Man. If you are as old as this preacher, you remember a song by the group *Chicago*: “Does anybody really know what time it is?” Recall the rest of the chorus? *Does anybody really care? If so I can’t imagine why/we all have time enough to die.* Hell of a thing for a twenty year old to write, except Vietnam was in full bloom, and Martin and Bobby had just been killed. It was hard to imagine why anybody really cared. Not caring was much easier. It still is.

Caring requires empathy, imagining that while the person is not here, not you or me, yours or ours, what happens to that person is important, worthy of our concern, our prayers, our acts of love. It is easier, safer, surer not to be bothered. John Lennon tried to help us “Imagine.” ‘Killed him too. So we hunker down, close to home, unless something, or someone, a tsunami, an earthquake, a survivor, captures our imagination. For a while.

Paul, to his credit, had a heaven of an imagination. He writes earlier in Romans of a God who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). He tells us that our salvation is nearer than we think, closer than tomorrow. An imagination like that is not unusual. It least it didn’t used to be. After all, Paul said he was the servant of one who had the audacity not only to imagine, but to proclaim, the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

In the final analysis Paul’s imagination lets us down in the reading for today, which could be summarized, “Jesus is coming back; be stoic!” Jesus himself, as depicted by Q and Matthew, is not at his parabolic best either, hearkening to one of God’s worst moments when God gives himself a “mulligan” at the cost of the life of every creature on earth, minus one ark-full. We need to look elsewhere for our inspiration.

Imagi-nation

This is a good time of year to argue about the greatest holiday movie ever made, and if you mention the 1947 black and white original version of “Miracle on 34th Street” with Natalie Wood, Maureen O’Hara, and Edmund Gwenn as Kris Kringle, you are right. You will have to use your imagination to conjure up this scene: Kris Kringle is giving young Susie, Natalie Wood, a lesson in using her imagination, so that the next time the kids invite her to play, she will know how to pretend, even though her mother has told her that pretending is silly. “You’ve heard of the French nation and the English nation, haven’t you? This is the imagi-nation.” The rest of the movie is about helping the rest of us remember where we put ours. You may find that it comes in handy not just for Santa Claus, Harry Potter, Narnia, and Middle Earth. It also helps when reading the Bible.

No one knows

Isaiah 1-3 showed quite the imagination. Not as psychedelic as Ezekiel's, but nevertheless impressive. First Isaiah imagined, in Jerusalem of all places, what peace would look like. Peace between Israel and Iraq, if you keep the geography and update the place names. When we wait and watch for our Messiah this Advent, we should probably remember that. We might also want to ask ourselves why, given the history of such expectations, we confine ourselves to Bethlehem and Armageddon. Our tradition argues that Messiah was born of the least likely woman in the least likely place at just about the least likely time in Jewish history. Should we not consider the possibility that Messiah will return in a way we least expect, say, as a Muslim woman in Indonesia? Crazy? Not what Scripture says? Exactly. Why should we expect that our expectations of the Second Coming will be fulfilled when we argue that folks missed the First Coming because their biblically-guided expectations were wrong? If Matthew can find Jesus of Nazareth in the Book of Isaiah, believe me, I can find an Indonesian Muslim woman in the Book of Revelation. It's not like 1 Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 24 line up all that well. Then again, maybe it is not expectation, but imagination, that is missing.

Unimaginable

How do you imagine the unimaginable? How do you say what cannot be said or tell what cannot be heard? We are so limited in so many ways, and it seems the more we know, the less we can imagine. We quibble in Homiletics now about whether Craddock's famous citation of Kierkegaard which begins, "There is no lack of information in a Christian land" still pertains; but no one seriously disputes the rest of the phrase—"Something else is lacking, and it is something that one person cannot communicate directly to another." Something is lacking, and I fear we lack the imagination to communicate it. Which is part of the reason 250,000,000 of our fellow citizens did not worship last weekend, and why many of us almost didn't make it to church ourselves. The hardest thing in the world to imagine is anything being different, especially when all the facts, and the accumulated wisdom, argue that we should do our best to preserve the old ways, keep the traditions alive, to the last Episcopalian.

Let's pretend

Can you imagine anything being different? Do you have enough imagination left to know what God's reign on earth might look like? Or are you too old to pretend? One thing many like to pretend is that swords beat themselves into plowshares, pretty much the same way spears spontaneously morph into pruning shears. It is almost like imagining that making war does not need to be unlearned; it will just happen if we all want it to enough, like keeping Tinkerbell alive.

No, for these sorts of things to happen, we will have to reclaim our imaginations. Advent is *the* season of eschatology, realized and otherwise. This is *the* time to live "already in the not yet," to recall the famous phrase. But what if we have forgotten how? Or we think it silly? You know what we do? We look around, wherever we are, and do what everyone else is doing, even if they are sharpening their swords, because it is tough out there, and revising their manuals on counter-insurgency, surgical strikes, and robotic drone strategic assassination, to incorporate what we have learned from

nine years in Afghanistan and seven years in Iraq. What we have learned. But what if we have not learned a damn thing? In a year or two we will come home, from exhaustion and bankruptcy, and it is likely that we will not have learned a thing. One day the media will once more shout, “Remember the Maine” or “WMD,” and off we’ll go. Except it will not be you or me, or our children or grandchildren, who do not “volunteer” because their lives have better options. Which could be why we let it happen. Imagine that.

Infinitely more

So, Christian, it will need to be Isaiah’s imagination that guides us in the first week of Advent, teaching us how to learn peace, beginning in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth. What does that look like? You’ll have to use your imagination. Not make believe, not wishing so that it will be so, but imagining God’s dream for creation and for your little corner in it. Then imagining what you need to do to get from here to there and taking those steps.

We usually fail, I think, not for lack of faith and trust and effort, but because we lack the imagination to see how things could be different. Isaiah imagined peace. In Jerusalem. Crazy. Seriously, seriously crazy. *Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.* Crazy.