

NOVEMBER 13TH, 2016: THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Malachi 3:19-20a II Thessalonians 3:7-12 Luke 21:5-19

Rarely does the future unfold exactly as we plan. There are always unexpected twists and turns, forcing us to deal with situations we never anticipated. This certainly has been the experience of people of faith, especially those committed to becoming other Christs.

As we know from our Christian Scriptures, one of the most unexpected things in Christian history was Jesus' delayed Parousia. His earliest followers presumed they'd only have to endure this particular state of affairs for a short time before he returned in the Second Coming and definitively changed how they lived. Though some held onto this belief for a couple of generations, by the time Luke writes in the mid-80s most were beginning to deal with the reality that they'd live their normal life-span and Jesus still wouldn't have returned. That's why the third evangelist constantly zeroes in on how to live that life-span.

Luke is convinced we should stop giving into the temptation of constantly looking for signs. Jesus will return when he returns, no matter what's happening around us. International and cosmic events have no relation to his Parousia. But sadly, because of his delay, Christians will now have to deal with something for which they hadn't planned: persecutions. Luke's Jesus warns, ". . . They will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name."

Not only that, but their faith will eventually create terrific tensions in their families. "You will even be handed over by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name . . ." But never give up hope. Jesus assures us, "Not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure your lives."

Yet these unexpected persecutions aren't all bad. Among other things, they'll provide Jesus' followers with a valuable opportunity: an occasion to "give testimony" to their faith. In most places in the 1st century CE Roman Empire people on trial have a legal right to publicly defend themselves. In the case of Christians, their trials will provide them with occasions to explain their lifestyle to whole new groups of people; something they should plan on doing - with little or no preparation.

Of course, Jesus' delayed return also created other problems, as the unknown author of II Thessalonians eventually discovered. His or her mentor, Paul, was convinced many of Jesus' followers could live an ideal, communal life, sharing all their possessions with one another. Yet as time went on, some of those ideal communities had to deal with freeloaders: people who received, but never gave. After first setting up the Apostle as an example of generosity, the author is forced to warn these selfish individuals, ". . . If anyone (is) unwilling to work, neither should that one eat." This rather late Christian writing demonstrates the community simply dealt with unexpected problems as they arose. As time went on they more and more understood the implications of carrying on Jesus' ministry.

Perhaps the prophet Malachi shares the best insight into an unplanned future. Though members of his community were glad to hear that Yahweh would eventually consume the "proud and all evildoers" with fire, he assures them that same inferno would be for them "a sun of justice with healing rays." For people of biblical faith, there's always "another hand:" another way of experiencing things. Were the canon of Scripture still open, I'm convinced the saying, "If life gives you lemons, make lemonade!" would have made it into our bibles a long time ago.

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NOVEMBER 20TH, 2016: CHRIST THE KING
II Samuel 5:1-3 Colossians 1:12-20 Luke 23:35-43

As far as I can tell, all of us long for peace and tranquility, though few of us are willing to pay the price it costs to actually obtain it.

I frequently repeat spiritual author Jack Shea's insight that the historical Jesus' ministry revolved around answering just three questions – What do you want out of life? Where do you get it? How much does it cost?

It's clear from today's first reading that the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel believe David – king of the 2 tribes comprising the southern kingdom of Judah - can bring about such peace and tranquility. The author of II Samuel succinctly states the situation: "When all the elders of Israel came to David in Hebron, King David made an agreement with them there before Yahweh, and they anointed him king of Israel." This history changing treaty was ratified in 1,000 BCE – the easiest date in biblical history to remember – and lasted until David's grandson Rehoboam's reign in the 930s when the one nation again reverted to being two.

But at least for those 70 years Jews believed they could eliminate war and fighting by having one leader stronger than any other leader, especially leaders of the countries surrounding them. Their king's army could either conquer those other armies, or put enough fear in them that they'd never dare start a war. A once popular 70s poster perfectly summarized their belief. "Lo, though I walk in the valley of darkness, I fear no evil, because I'm the meanest s.o.b. in the valley." Peace came through power.

The Pauline disciple who wrote Colossians was convinced Jesus of Nazareth could also bring peace and tranquility, not just to Israel and Judah but to the whole world. Yet how this Galilean carpenter planned on doing it differed radically from David's methodology. It turned everything upside down. This itinerant peasant preacher believed peace could only definitively be achieved by reconciliation, not warfare. The Colossians author was convinced that Jesus personally accomplished this "by the blood of his cross." Against all logic, Jesus' peace came not from strength but from weakness – the weakness one demonstrates by loving, not conquering others.

Luke couldn't state this early Christian belief any better. Using Jesus' actual crucifixion as the background, he shows how his kingship was diametrically opposed to any other kind of leadership. Following common wisdom, one of the criminals crucified with him joins the crowd in wanting to know why the Christ – the savior of Israel – isn't saving the three of them by demonstrating he's more powerful than the soldiers who've just nailed them to their crosses.

Yet Luke's Jesus, always more concerned with the needs of others than his own, ignores their demands and instead responds to the plaintive request of the second criminal, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." He simply tells him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." In other words, "Stop worrying! My suffering and death will bring you peace."

The historical Jesus – following Jack Shea's insight – assured his followers they could achieve peace and tranquility simply by imitating him. Not very complicated. But it was the cost of that imitation which created difficulties. To eventually reach a tranquil state, we, like him, would first have to suffer and die by giving ourselves to those around us – especially our enemies.

No wonder after just a few centuries some theologians got us off the suffering and dying hook by coming up with the concept of a "just war." Just one problem: not only didn't the gospel Jesus ever mention that loophole, but after 1600 years of employing it, it has yet to bring anyone lasting peace and tranquility.

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