

Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Peter 3: 8-15(a)

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
December 7, 2008
Second Sunday in Advent

“Waiting in God’s Time”

2nd Peter is not a book from which preachers usually choose texts. Its shortness and the issues it addresses are not generally used in the contemporary church. At the same time, Peter wrestles with one of the critical problems the early church faced which is the delay of Jesus’ return and the moral freedom which accompanies a disbelieving position. During Advent, when the liturgical spotlight falls on both the First and Second Comings of Jesus, it is important to listen to 2nd Peter.

The beginning of the chapter sets the tone for what follows. Unbelievers attach the delay of the longed-for return of Christ and live as though there will be no final judgment. They pessimistically ask what has happened to God’s promise, and suggest the created world has done just fine without God’s help.

But take note! God is not only in control; He is always on time. Critics attempt to make us believe God has fallen asleep, or He is inept, or He does not keep His promises. Speaking with fondness to his readers, Peter asks them not to forget that “with the Lord, one day is as a thousand years.” Peter practices what he preaches. He encourages his readers to give attention to the Word of God which comes from the prophets and the apostles.

Insisting the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, Peter gives a better reason for the fact Jesus has not yet returned. He remembers well the teaching of his Master on this subject. Acts 1:17 says, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.” Jesus also says, “But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.

So Peter determines the Lord is not really slow concerning His promise. Christ never states an exact time in which He will return. It is in the Father’s hands. Not even the angels know the time of Christ’s return. The Greek word translated as “not slack” actually means to delay. We want to remember God is never late. God is never delayed by outward circumstances or by others. God is always in control. God’s motive is always His love for us. God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son. It is because of His love for the world that Jesus is not yet returned. Because of God’s long and patient endurance, God waits for all of us to come to repentance.

In vs. 8, Peter restates Psalm 90:4, “For a thousand years in your sight/are like yesterday when it is past/or like a watch in the night.” This verse is used to show human life is fleeting, while God is everlasting; the age before the end of the world may seem long to humans, but not to God. Peter affirms that what may seem like a delay of the Parousia or Second Coming is really not a delay from God’s perspective; and Peter still expects the Second Coming to come in his lifetime and the lifetime of those to whom he writes.

Peter addresses the issue of God and creation. God is active not only in the establishing of the heavens and the earth but also in preserving and maintaining His creation. It would be very misjudging to assume the world operates without God. Look at the flood. God destroys the earth with water; and, in fact, is the One who keeps our present world from being destroyed by fire.

Then Peter tackles head-on the issue of the delay of the Second Coming. First there is the problem of human limitations. God does not calculate time the way we do. When humans become impatient, they then become doubting and cynical. But God remains committed to His divine promise. In fact, God's patience is a measure of divine grace. God is not eager to destroy and punish His disobedient children. God desires sufficient time for all of us to repent.

Peter follows the prophets and Paul in pointing to God's divine mercy, which holds back the judgment and prolongs the time to enable true repentance. This explanation of the delay may not satisfy every question we may have about the return of Christ, especially the questions of those oppressed and marginalized, who yearn for the end, in order to have relief from their earthly predicaments. Peter's explanation is written more for the critics and unbelievers whose views need challenging. The challenge is for them to live faithfully in the present and to "regard the patience of our Lord as salvation."

Second, now that Peter reminds his readers of God's view in our history, he makes a reaffirmation of the traditional "day of the Lord." According to

Charles Cousar, a Biblical scholar, two features stand out. On the one hand, the image of the thief suggests suddenness and unexpectedness. There is no need for guessing. Preparing for the final day is critical, but it does not consist of making timetables and calculating precise moments. On the other hand, Mr. Cousar reminds us the traditional language of the destruction of the created world with fire is not without meaning. Biblically, “fire” indicates testing, the burning of what is on the boundary line and the continuance of what is lasting, valuable, and worthy.

Third, Peter asks what all this means for the present lives of his readers. Given the possibility of a future destruction of creation, Peter’s readers go about their daily lives in a mood of expectancy. Instead of doubt and disrespect, they hope for what lies beyond destruction which would be new heavens and a new earth. Proper preparing for the future does not consist of guessing, but in leading lives of holiness and godliness in striving for peace.

He states his belief that the Lord is going to keep His promise. Peter says it is not a matter of “if” Christ is coming. It is simply a question of “when” Christ will return. Critics may doubt, and the world may totally ignore Peter. But Jesus Christ is coming again! Jesus says, “Therefore, you should always be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him.” Peter then describes what will happen.

We want to remember Peter is present when Christ shares His teaching about His Second Coming. Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples, “But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken

into.” Peter reminds us Christ may come like a thief in the night. The thief in the night is quite effective in conveying both the unexpectedness of the Second Coming and the threat of judgment it brings to those who impose on the patience of God by delaying their own repentance.

At the Second Coming, Peter tells us the heavens will pass away, and then the earthly elements will dissolve with fire. Since the earth is preserved for a fiery judgment and since a new heaven and earth will be coming, whatever constitutes things in creation, including the earth, will be dissolved as well. The resulting state of the earth and the deeds done upon it are described as “found.” Without the obstruction of the heavens, which are now burned away, the works of humanity will become visible to God and vulnerable to His judgment. This is the destruction of the ungodly, when the earth is destroyed by fire, and why the faithful are instructed to be “found” at peace and without spot or blemish. This scene is one aspect of the Biblical image of the wicked people trying in vain to hide from God’s judgment at the end of the world as we know it.

Even though we live in the day of atomic power, space travel, and many scientific achievements, and even though we have witnessed the power and utter destruction of nuclear weapons, it is difficult for us to comprehend just what it would be like for the heavens to be destroyed and to pass away. What a mess!

Peter tells us the earth will be burned up. Not only will the earth be burned up, but everything upon the earth. It will be an incredible and incomprehensible event. If you have ever seen acreage after a forest fire

ravages the land, either seeing it on television or worse yet seeing it in person, then you have a basic idea of what Peter is describing. It will be total and absolute destruction and horrific, to say the least.

In short, there will be nothing remaining. The earth will be consumed and everything on it. And the heavens will be destroyed. Until the atom and hydrogen bombs were developed, it was difficult for humans to imagine such destruction could be possible.

Paul Cedar in *The Preacher's Commentary*, says our generations now know it is not only possible; but it is also probable. Peter says it is not only probable, but it is absolutely certain. Peter indicates destruction of the earth and the heavens is part of God's master plan. Therefore, we are to be prepared. Peter suggests four specific areas of our lifestyles to which we should attend if we believe the Word of God and believe all things are to be destroyed as the Bible says. Peter describes what manner of people God wants us to be.

First, we are to live lives of holy conduct. Peter writes a great deal about holiness in both his letters. His most specific teaching is found in 1st Peter 1:15,16 where he says, "But as He who has called you is holy, you also should be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'."

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus shares the parable about the faithful and unfaithful servants. When the master returns from a trip, he finds the good servant serving faithfully, who is rewarded. But the unfaithful servant is

beating his fellow servants. He is cut in two and cast out with the hypocrites. All God's servants are to be ready for our Lord to return!

Second, Peter tells us to live lives of godliness. In order to live godly lives, we are to live like Christ. We are not to live according to the flesh. We are to live like the good servants in another parable of Jesus who do not bury the talents the master gives them, but invest them wisely. Jesus ends the parable by saying, "for to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away."

Third, Peter tells us to look for Christ's coming. Faithfulness is one of the great attributes of God who asks His children to follow Him with faithfulness. Peter's instruction is clear: we are to be faithfully watching for Christ's coming with expectation.

Jesus illustrated this important truth by sharing the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The foolish virgins are not faithful and consequently are not adequately prepared. But the wise virgins are watching for Christ's coming and are adequately prepared.

The conclusion of Jesus is clear. "Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." God gives the same warning after speaking about Noah, the two women grinding at the mill, and the two men working in the field.

Fourth, we should hurry Christ's coming. Although Peter does not give us clear instructions on how to accelerate Christ's coming, the message seems clear. If the reason Christ is not yet come is because He is patiently waiting and not willing for any of us to perish but that all should come to Him in repentance, then we may all be involved and included in the spiritual harvest. Christ gives us His commission in Matthew 28:19 and says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." By making disciples of others, we show our repentance of our sins and can hurry Christ's Second Coming.

Patience is often listed as a character trait of God. It is also listed by Paul as a fruit of the Spirit. God's patience and mercy are outgrowths of God's love in putting up with the sins of sinners and withholding any judgment the sin deserves when committed. The time during God's patience and mercy allows the sinner time to repent; but this time of mercy is not unlimited. Judgment eventually comes for those who do not repent, and the time of its coming is as unpredictable as the coming of the thief. Peter suggests we do not become too comfortable with God's patience so that we procrastinate our immediate repentance when we stray from the way of righteousness or ignore our obligations to evangelism with a false sense that there is plenty of time to attend to those who have not yet repented.

Holiness, godliness, peace, and righteousness are four ingredients characterizing the waiting mood of Advent. They include both personal and social areas of our lives, as well as attention to ourselves and to the broader community. Our call to right living is partially motivated by our desire to live eternally in righteousness with God when all corruption is destroyed.

We are not called upon to warm ourselves in the sunshine of God's kingdom or to sleep as did the foolish virgins. We are called to labor in the Lord's vineyard. If we are to hurry the Second Coming of Christ, we are to live holy and godly lives, be alert for Christ's coming, and work faithfully to share His love and salvation with others.

The prophetic statements made by Peter concerning the passing away of the heavens and the destruction of the earth are not meant to be determined by necessity. Peter is constantly calling us to the life of hope in Christ Jesus.

Peter moves on to words of hope and triumph. There will be new heavens and a new earth when the kingdom of Christ comes, and we are to be watching for them. Peter says all this will happen according to God's promise. One example of this promise is found in Isaiah 65:17, "For behold I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind."

Peter indicates we have many reasons to look forward to Christ's Parousia, or Second Coming. Admittedly, it may seem a little frightening. At the same time, it is truly exciting to know Christ will return and will take us all to live with Him in eternity. God's plan for us will some day come to be. God is waiting patiently for us to repent of our sins, to serve only God, to trust completely in Christ, and to give ourselves totally to God. John writes in Revelation, "There will be no more curse and no more night...And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have

passed away.” All these things, the destruction of the earth and Christ’s Second Coming will occur. Will they happen soon? Only God knows when they will happen. God’s definition of “soon” will never agree with our human definition. Our hope is in trusting in Christ and knowing God keeps His promises to those of us who are faithful. Be strong, trust in God, and know Christ Jesus is coming! Marana tha, Come, Lord Jesus! Amen!