

## WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

(Originally ETERNAL RETURN)

Texts on Advent One

*Jeremiah 33: 14-16*

*Luke 21: 25-36*

November 29, 2009

“The decade from Hell,” is the handle the current *Time Magazine* gives to the otherwise nameless ten years now passing over. Their case is easily made. The span began with strange foreboding that all our computers would fail at midnight on December 31—but no, instead, our dream failed. Having slept for a generation through ‘morning in America,’ we stumbled into the consequences of neglect for our democracy, our energy use, our international relations, our finances, our infrastructure, our national and personal health. We have ignored the counsel to “watch at all times, praying that [we] may have strength to escape all the things that will take place.” Whether we are now awake, I do not know, but I know the spirit of Advent, which begins today, and always, this way: “Awake! Lest that day come upon you suddenly like a snare.”

Does the warning work? To what end? you might ask. Advent probably works well as the dread warning to our inner Santa that only twenty-some days remain before “that day” comes upon us like a snare. And aren’t we supposed to save the American economy too in this next span of days? Though we may wring our hands over “Christ missed” in Christmas, if we think about Advent as a special time of waiting—that is what the word means—what are we waiting for? Christmas Day? Why? Does Christ come on Christmas Day, as so many carols say? In what sense? Too often religion and its rituals simply swaddle Jesus’ arms in ever-infanthood so we need never feel him flayed upon the cross. If Advent works us toward the holy day only as a timid reminder to compassion, such annuals are hardly worth waiting for. And frankly, the lack of a serious answer to the question, what we are waiting for, is enough to drive reasonable minds from Christian religion as surely as a boy after a certain age feels driven from his mother’s embrace. To understand how to wait for Christ’s coming, you have to put away childish things and come home again. Not every adult has.

For hundreds of millions of human beings through thousands of years, the annual cycle of the new year festivals has had the function to break time down into little pieces stripped of more weight than fits into twelve months. Among many other stratagems, the ever-returning festivals are, in Mircea Eliade’s deft phrase, “how man has tolerated history.”<sup>1</sup> He means this. Since the dawn of civilization, the error and oppression and injustice and destruction felt across all lives and all lands has presented a problem to consciousness, how to bear it: *Who is responsible?* One response is, *No one. It is fate. It is in the stars. It is in the will of the gods—to whose coming rebirth we now turn as the winter sun tarries long in darkness.* Glad to assert that what is past is ended, we start again at the beginning, the eternal return. In this worldview, there is no history, really. Nothing adds up. Nothing is ever new. The reveler is not in control, and not responsible. In such an annual festival, what are we waiting for? A symbolic, all-together-now release from our sins. For very many in the West, Advent and Christmas have been pressed into duty alongside New Year’s at the task of abolishing history from the mind, so that one not feel hopelessness in the face of heartless powers. Is this the way in the dark for a Christian? It is not.

Here’s a twist. In the centuries before and after Jesus’ birth, many religions and cultures embraced a different solution to the burden of history. They imagined not the endless cycle with nothing new, but a cataclysmic conclusion for which they fervently prayed. How much more bearable are the present evils if it is thought they are hardly real in comparison with the judgment soon to fall bringing release for

---

Éliade, M. *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1958)

the righteous and woe to the wicked. This too is an anti-historical worldview. The importance of the experience of the consequence of human choices is set at zero. History—personal or political—means nothing. During the last generation of sleep in America, not a few of our political leaders have claimed to embrace this view, that Jesus is coming soon to draw this age to a close. We Americans pride ourselves on letting people believe what they believe, but why would we let anyone take the wheel of government who thinks the car and the road are meaningless?

The reading we heard this morning—there is another like it in Mark's gospel and another in Matthew's—places Jesus squarely inside that worldview. I used to resist this possibility. I blamed it on the early church, because I didn't want "my Jesus" tied up with ignorance of that sort, whether ancient or fundamentalist. But I am reminded soberly that Jesus was a man. Ancient cultures, including those of Israel and the church, embraced this method—this coping mechanism—for lifting the burden of terror imposed by empires and time. Hearing these doleful warnings on the first Sunday in Advent, we may cringe to be found in company with believers who think that rescue—salvation!—from bad storms, bad policies, and bad men will come in purifying fire from power utterly outside history and human freedom. Is that what we are supposed to be waiting for? Reasonable minds, as we have said, will flee from religion so opposed to the possibility of human freedom. But let us be sober about our strengths and weaknesses. We love our freedom, up to a point, but our "hearts [are easily] weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life" which blunt and distort our freedom. Is there a way to wait that can be found somewhere between the rock of apocalypse and the hard place of annual revels and forgetfulness? If so, what has Jesus to do with it?

There is a third way. We might call it by several names, all synonyms. The way of historical conscience. The way of choice and responsibility, which can introduce genuinely new realities into history. The way of accepting our fallenness—our sin; the way of seeing that our choices not seldom fail to bring good. The way of faith. It is the way of Abraham and Sarah, who hear the Divine call to go to a far country for a wide purpose. It is the way of Jacob, fleeing his older brother and his even older addictions, yet discovering in the night his possibility in the dream of the ladder. "Here, —in the midst of my choices—God is in this place, and I did not know it."

My heart has taught me that if Jesus sometimes placed his hope in an antihistorical worldview, it does not matter, since the portrait of his living and dying is quite explicitly the work and hope of inspired, historical faith—faith that in his choosing now / and now / and now how to act and how to love and how to die, that he, in the grace of God, might bring into history that new good thing that the will of God most sought of him. If the man Jesus lived between the ages, sorting out belief in fate and trust in faith, well, so do you and so do I. Is this not how we wake, how we rise from the stones of our grief, our addictions, our fears that nothing we do can make any difference? When with the apostle Paul we say that you, O church, are the Body of Christ, and individually members of him, do we not mean therefore to stand before the Son of man now and take again the authority and confidence to choose to bring forth our eye, our hope, our demand for justice, our compassion, our wisdom, our sacrifice, our true Self into the fabric of history being made new. This is what Resurrection is all about.

Many say they can make the needed new without God. Many churchgoers have no interest in making anything new under the sun. Many people are just trying to live their lives, thank you. Let us have no quarrel with the way others sift their way through time. But you are here in this church, at this time of year, at this time in history, in this city. To you therefore I declare: Boldly take the Christian religion to your heart and mind and will. It is religion for those who do not blench from seeing themselves as fallen man, fallen woman, nested in errors from which we cannot extricate ourselves alone. In the last sentence of his book, Eliade calls Christianity "a final abandonment of the archetypes of paradise and repetition." (p. 162)

Learn then to watch at all times for the possibility that God is drawing forth from you. Practice the great silence. Find out what it means to wait upon the Lord with all your heart. Know that you will stumble—but only if the way you are going is hard—a way worthy of the strength of Christ within you. Lean into your soul’s friends, who are the coming church—a church whose purposes are ever more deeply woven into the fabric of history and community, of compassion and change. For this, the Advent light is burning. This is what we are waiting for.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

*First Presbyterian Church  
Brooklyn, New York*

© 2009 Stephen H. Phelps