

“Asking the Right Question”

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Mark 1:1-8; II Peter 3:8-15a

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“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”

While pondering today’s scripture texts, I considered how this text fits within the season of advent, a time when we remember the birth of Christ and anticipate his return. In this text, Christians are impatiently waiting for Christ’s return.

The impatience with waiting is one we can appreciate! During this season of advent, we can hear children moan, Christmas will never get here! Adults may eagerly look forward to seeing dear friends or family during the holidays and feel the same way.

Impatience with waiting has a long history with God’s people. The ancient Israelites complained about when the Messiah would come. They had been in Exile and waiting for many centuries since the Prophets had foretold that a Messiah would come to restore Israel to its former glory. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people cried through the Prophets and the psalms: O Lord, how long must we wait?

The Jewish ascetic, John the Baptist, prepared the way for Jesus’s arrival by proclaiming that the coming of the Messiah was soon. He baptized Believers as a sign of their repentance, of God’s forgiveness and of their redemption. John was a rough character. He dressed in scratchy camel’s hair instead of soft clothing, ate locusts instead of fine food, and lived in the wilderness among wild animals instead of in a house in a village. The purpose of John’s prophesy was to prepare the world for the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah.

John’s life was devoted to holy living and fulfilling his mission as a herald for the Messiah. While the Jews were crying: Lord, how long must we wait? John the Baptist was proclaiming: prepare yourselves for the arrival of the Lord!

Then Jesus, the Messiah, came. He taught the people about how to be righteous and to live a life that was pleasing to God. He taught how to care for each other, how to worship, and how to bring others to knowledge of God. He taught that God loves all people and desires salvation for all people.

Jesus, the Messiah, was crucified for this message. The Messiah ascended to heaven to be with God and will return at the end of time to restore God’s Kingdom on Earth.

This is our hope for the future. But what about now? Today’s text answers that question.

Our text comes from the Epistle of II Peter in the New Testament which was written somewhere between 50-100 years after Christ. It is believed that it was written by a disciple of the Apostle Peter to Christians who were watching the older generation of Christians die, those who were among the first converts to the Christian faith who had heard the Apostles preach. They may even have met Jesus, himself, and heard him teach during his ministry in Palestine. When this letter was written, Christians are waiting for Christ’s return, which they had thought would occur in their lifetimes.

The early Christians picked up the refrain of their ancestors with their cries: Lord, how long must we wait? These early Christians were counting time in human terms, just like the ancient Israelites. And just like the ancient Israelites, their vision was limited, because they were focused on Christ’s return and their own salvation. They were not considering God’s purposes.

We need to look at the world and history in the way that God does. God wants to redeem all people. God has a different sense of time than we do, where a thousand years are like a day, and God is patiently waiting for the time when all people repent and may be redeemed, because God desires that no one perish.

Asking God when Christ will return was a question asked by the church in II Peter and a question that we have asked as well. But is this an important question for us to ask? Is it important for us to know when? The writer of II Peter says: no. That the important question for us to ask is: how should I live while I wait on God? II Peter tell us that we need to change our perspective from our expectations for God to what God expects from us during this time of waiting. How are we to live as people of God while we yearn for that time when we will be with God? How are we to meet God's expectations for us—those who are already redeemed?

Today's text tells us that while we wait on God, we are to lead lives of holiness and godliness. We are to strive to be at peace without spot or blemish. This means that we are to live so that our lives reflect the character of God. But how do we do this? What are the rules? What do we need to do to be holy and godly?

When we stop and think about it, we already know the answers to these questions. Jesus, the Messiah, taught us what to do and how to live. Jesus taught that the Greatest Commandment was to love God with our whole hearts and souls and minds, and that the Second Commandment was to love our neighbor as ourselves. Living in the love of God and the love of neighbor fulfills all law and commandments. He looked at the Old Testament, the commandments and rules set out so meticulously, especially in the Book of Leviticus. And he reduced all of those laws and rules down to two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all of heart, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's it! Only two.

If we love God and act in the love of God in all things toward all people, then we are living in holiness and godliness. That is all that God requires. Jesus is our best example of how to do this. Jesus showed his love for God in his worship at the Temple, in his observance of religious rites and practices such as Passover, by going to the Temple to listen to the priests teach, and by learning scripture. Jesus loved God by praying, engaging in active conversation with God about the world around him and seeking discernment for his own decisions and actions. But the love of God compels us to do more than acts of worship and devotion.

The love of God that we enjoy, that warms our hearts, and enriches our souls and minds, the all-consuming love of God, compels us to love our neighbor. When we look at Jesus, we have the perfect example for how to love God and how to love our neighbor.

Jesus loved his neighbor. Jesus touched the Untouchable to heal a leper who was unclean from a terrible disease, making him clean and healthy. Jesus went to the home of a man who was despised by others and ate a meal with a tax collector.

Jesus was friends with a man who ate bugs, by choice, when other food was available. He heard the proclamation of John the Baptist, received the Holy Spirit in baptism, and began his public ministry.

Jesus taught by the way he lived about how to show the love of God to our neighbors. He taught that our neighbor is every person on this planet and not just those people we like or find socially acceptable. Up until the day that Christ ascended to heaven, he lived, and taught how to live in the love of God.

In this time of Advent, while we wait for the return of Christ, we should live as Christ taught us how to live. We should love God wholeheartedly. We should show the love of God to the world by loving our neighbor. It is in this way that we will live in holiness and godliness until the Lord returns. By living in love as Jesus taught us to do, we are witnesses for the love of God and our witness enables other people to believe in the love of God. If we love God with our whole selves and love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, then we are living holy and godly lives. We are living as God expects and requires.

As Christians, we believe that Christ desires to redeem all people. We are redeemed by God's love and look forward to eternal life with God. We know our future. We do not need to be concerned about when God will return. We do not need to be impatient because God has not returned according to our timetable because this is a time of God's patience. For God is waiting on humanity so that all of the world may come to repentance and be redeemed. In this time of waiting for Christ's return, we have hope for the future redemption of the entire world. We are to prepare for the end of time, and Christ's return, by living in holiness and

godliness, and strive to be found at peace. As Christians, we have hope in our salvation and we have hope for the entire world's redemption when Christ returns.

This community of faith, Cook's Memorial, is also in a time of waiting, its own season of advent. You have been without a permanent pastor for several months now and you will be without one for a while longer. As you wait, and anticipate the arrival of your future pastor, do not focus on when this person will come. Instead, consider how you are living now. How is Cook's Memorial loving God wholeheartedly as a community of faith? How is this church showing the love of God to its neighbors? What is your witness in this community?

This is a time for hope about the future. Today's text invites us to embrace hope and to take action. It invites us to anticipate the future! To be holy and godly and to strive to be at peace. This is a time for your lives to reflect your love of God, for your lives to be a witness for that love to all people. How is Christ calling Cook's Memorial to love and service right now? Are you living in holiness and in godliness? Are you a witness for God's love in this world? Are you preparing for the return of Christ? Do you have hope for the repentance and redemption of the world?

During this season of Advent in the month of December, Christians around the world focus on the birth of the baby Jesus, the Christ child. We enjoy singing Christmas carols and re-imagining the birth narratives in nativity scenes and children's plays. But in the midst of this activity and fun, we need to remember the deeper meaning of this season. At Christmas, we celebrate the love of God who came to Earth and lived like one of us, teaching us how to be holy and to live godly lives, who suffered and died, and we anticipate his return when all people will be redeemed.

As individuals and as a community, let us wait on the Lord with hope and action. And let us remember to ask the right question—how do we live in the love of God and love of neighbor while we wait on the Lord to redeem the world?