

“Living the Future”

Ephesians 1:15-23, 2 Peter 3:8-9 & 13, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, & Psalm 80:1-3

Pastor James York

November 19, 2017

The family of Jean Walker who lives in Edinburgh, Scotland were sorting through some papers stashed away her bedroom. They found a stack of letters. One of them was addressed to “Jean on her 21st birthday.” It had been written by Jean herself in the year 1939, when Jean was sixteen years old. At one point in the letter, Jean writes, “I’ll be right back. I just have to go around the house and pull down the black-out curtains.” At the dawn of what would prove to be a long world war, not knowing if she would survive Hitler’s bombs or a German invasion, a sixteen-year-old lassie sits in a darkened house in Dundee, and writes to her twenty-one-year-old self, pouring out her fears, her dreams, and her yearnings for a future she cannot see, but dares to hope for.

“Christ the King,” or if you prefer, “The Reign of Christ” is a peculiar event in the church’s liturgical calendar. It is about our future for we are heirs of Christ our King. We will enjoy eternal life in God’s kingdom. Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we contemplate the culmination of all the years. How one envisions their future affects how one lives in the present. Today, we contemplate how God’s kingdom is drawing us into the future. We are called to live the glorious, joyous, loving, righteousness of God’s kingdom today. We are invited to live the future.

I wonder how Jean’s letter to her future self affected the way she lived her daily life? What will we see when we pull up the black-out curtains and enjoy King Jesus and God’s kingdom? We strain to catch glimpses of God’s future and find ourselves looking at the present through the future’s lens. The future that lies just beyond the horizon is, at the same time, the present that stares us in the face. The King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Good Shepherd, the Healer, Creator, Redeemer, Prince of peace, love incarnate, joy in flesh, summons us to look forward to the fulfilment of God’s kingdom. And at the same time, King Jesus calls us to look around. The signs of God’s dawning kingdom are everywhere. We live with one foot in the present and the other in the future. We live in the kingdom arrived and the kingdom yet to ripen, in the already and the not yet. We pray to live the future in our daily life “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

The Apostle Paul encourages us to live the future today with the eyes of our heart enlightened.

Ephesians 1:15-23 NLT “Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God’s people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope God has given to those God called—God’s holy people who are God’s rich and glorious inheritance. I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God’s power for us who believe God. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated God in the place of honor at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms. Now God is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come. God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made Jesus head over all things for the benefit of the church. And the church is Christ’s body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself.”

Paul prays that God will give us hope. Hope is confident expectancy in the promises of God. God’s promises all will be fulfilled. Love endures forever. Our joy will be full and complete. We will enjoy glorious perfected eternal life. We will live in harmony with each other and the cosmos.

Great is the mystery of faith! Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! We believe that Jesus, who was crucified dead and buried, is risen and alive. We believe that the news of his life, death, and resurrection is good news for the whole world, for everyone. We believe the church, you, me and all believers is the body of Christ in the world. Somehow the risen Christ is among us as the head and the heart of the church. Most Christians with great enthusiasm proclaim: Christ is risen! But some are more ambiguous regarding: Christ will come again! When and how will Christ come again? The early church thought it would be in their life time.

Peter writes, **2 Peter 3:8-9 & 13 NLT** “**But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn’t really being slow about God’s promise, as some people think. No, God is being patient for your sake. God does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. We are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth God has promised, a world filled with God’s righteousness.**” God is patient not wanting anyone to be destroyed, so God keeps flooding everyone’s life with grace eager for us all to return home to God’s love.

N. T. Wright says, “Here is the mystery, the secret, one might almost say the cunning, of the deep love of God: that it is bound to draw on to Godself the hatred and pain and shame and anger and bitterness and rejection of the world, but to draw all those things on to Godself is precisely the means, chosen from all eternity by the generous, loving God, by which to rid God’s world of the evils which have resulted from human abuse of God-given freedom.” Christ is actively coming again right now drawing us into God’s glorious kingdom. How long may this take. Well, a thousand years is like a day to God for God is beyond time.

In the meantime, we are drawn forward by the promise of the fulfillment of God’s kingdom. Theologians have a fancy name for this future longing: eschatology, the doctrine of God’s future. Eschatology is vitally important because how we view God’s future has everything to do with how we live in the present.

Duke Ellington once said, “There are two types of music, good and bad, and you can tell them apart by listening.” By listening to a couple of bad versions of eschatology, we might discover a good one.

Pastor Brant Copeland writes, “One bad but popular strain of eschatology is best known from the *Left Behind* series of novels and movies. This made up formula is you have the Rapture, during which true believers are taken up into heaven. Then you have the Tribulation, which gives those left behind seven years to become believers. Then you have the Second Coming, which inaugurates the Millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Next comes the End. This neat formula for God’s future works for selling novels and movies, but requires a combination of biblical literalism and textual slight of hand that drives Biblical scholars crazy. It squeezes square pegs into round holes and converts elegant metaphors into Excel spreadsheets. It conflates poetry with prognosis and turns hope into fear. This kind of eschatology is dangerous because it fuels the flames of war in the Middle East and ignores the prophetic call for social justice and environmental stewardship. Why work for justice if, at any moment, you will be stepping on the eschatological elevator and pushing the “up” button? Why work for peace if peace postpones the Second Coming of Christ? For all its Biblical allusions, this kind of eschatology is ultimately unfair to the Bible and distorts the Gospel of grace.”

Pastor Brant continues, “At the other end of the spectrum is another bad version of eschatology. According to this view, the eschaton has already arrived, or pretty close to it, and the world is making steady progress toward perfection. It emphasizes the power of positive thinking, self-improvement, technological advance, and social progress. Every day we are getting better and better by our own actions. A quick scan of the news reveals this is not true. Left to our own devices, we human beings are not making the world better and better.” Pastor Brant says, “I’d rather be a character in a *Left Behind* novel than a practitioner of this mushy, sentimental, rose-tinted nonsense. Between these two extremes lies a third way of looking at God’s future. It takes the Bible’s witness seriously without reading all its texts literally. It places our confidence in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and thereby changed both the present and the future. The future is already settled: Christ is risen and, as the old Creed says, “sitteth on the right hand of God.” God has already redeemed the world. From God’s perspective, God’s work is done, and our future is secure. We won’t save the world. God has already saved the world.”

The book of Revelation is in the Bible not to give us a time table, or logistics, rather to give us one person’s snapshot visions of God’s future. Revelation invites us to dream about the glory of God’s kingdom fully-established. Revelation invites us to write a letter to our future self, so we can live some of the future today.

God’s “new heaven and a new earth” are guaranteed because Christ is risen. “Dry your tears,” the seer of Patmos writes to the seven churches. “Don’t be afraid of the present. Here, have a peek at God’s future. Feel how that future is drawing you forward.”

The Apostle Paul conveys a similar reassurance to the churches in Corinth, you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hang in there. You have everything you need to live as God’s faithful people.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 NRSV “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in God, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by Jesus you were called into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Too often, I get stuck regretting a past mistake. Too often, I overthink a decision. Too often, I am too conservative, reserved, and play it safe. My Spiritual Director often brought up eschatology. James, you know your future is secure rejoicing in God’s glorious kingdom, so relax, let go, live life to the fullest, be bold, stir things up, take risks, live abundantly. My Spiritual Director reminded me that ultimately there is nothing I can do, or anyone can do, to mess up glorious eternal life so live your daily life like you believe it.

Envisioning God’s coming kingdom gives us courage to make it through tough decision, tenacity to journey through difficult days, perseverance to keep loving, the strength to try again after failure, perception to see healing on the other side of sickness, persistence to recover from tragedy. Envisioning God’s kingdom gave a young girl the fortitude during a horrific war to write a letter to her future self.

Eschatology invites us to glimpse the finished work of God in Christ, and to bring that work to bear on this yet unfinished world. It invites us to take part in a coming future that is not of our making, but welcomes our participation. Left to our own efforts, we are condemned to failure and despair, but the Christ of the gospel goes ahead of us, beckoning us into the future he himself guarantees. “I know the way forward,” he tells us. “I’ve been this way ahead of you.” God’s future is, even now, breaking in upon the present. The kingdom is both now and not yet.

We are in the same boat as the writer of Psalm 80, who longed for the restoration of God’s kingdom. **Psalm 80:1-3 NRSV “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”** Eschatology goes beyond the restoration of people to a restored cosmos. All will be glorious.

Why do we support Metropolitan Interfaith Coalition on Affordable Housing, build Habitat for Humanity houses, build houses in Haiti and make house repairs through workcamp? It is because we know that in God’s kingdom there will be no shacks, no run-down tenements, no trailers with rotting floors. When we put the finishing touches on a house and hand the keys over to the new owner, we’re saying to the world, “Here’s a window into God’s Kingdom. Take a peek at our future in God’s Kingdom and grab a hammer.”

We educate children through Peacemaking at Cowern Elementary, Remember Niger and soon a new partnership with North Metro Flex Academy; because in God’s kingdom, everyone is beloved and appreciated for their giftedness. Learn about the future by educating a child.

We donate food to the North St. Paul Area Food Shelf, work at the Merrick Food Shelf, make snack bags for children, make sandwiches for the homeless and support numerous food programs because in God’s kingdom everyone enjoys an abundance and variety of food. Taste the future by sharing a meal.

We recycle, help neighbors keep storm drains clean, make energy efficient upgrades to our building, because in God’s kingdom people living in harmony with creation and delight in the magnificence of the cosmos. Sense the future by caring for creation.

We deliver care packages to veterans, birthday cards for the clients of caseworkers, gifts through Operation Christmas Child, care cards for homebound, books for teachers at Weaver Elementary; because in God’s kingdom every person belongs, and every person is celebrated. Embrace the future by caring for others.

We support Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, One Great Hour of Sharing, the Peacemaking Offering, Pentecost Offering, Christmas Joy Offering, Clearwater Forest and serve at the Dwelling Place because in God’s kingdom everyone is safe and is supplied with every need with lavishness. Delight in the future through your sharing and service that makes sure everyone has enough and is loved.

When heaven comes to earth, when the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, when God’s face shines for all of us to see, the distance between us and the kingdom will be just this tiny bit shorter, because you and I will have been building toward it. We don’t believe that human beings will bring in God’s kingdom by ourselves. That’s bad eschatology. Nor do we hanker for the Rapture to snatch us away from neighbors in need.

That's even worse eschatology. I hope none of us expect God to make our life great at the expense of another. Instead we live and serve, trusting that Christ will come again, to draw all people to God, perfecting and completing our imperfect efforts. Make every life great. Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Like a sixteen-year-old girl who has just pulled down the black-out curtains and is penning a letter to her future self, we center our present selves in a future we cannot see clearly, but picture through the mystery of faith and the eyes of our hearts. We are striving to live our glorious future as a beloved member of God's Kingdom today. Amen