

Advent Hope
Heaven Help Us

If you were to diagnose the state of the world today what would be your assessment? Very fit ... all systems go? Mildly ill ... needing a adjustment or medicine here and there? Or maybe, quite ill in need of serious and immediate attention? Or, worse still, would you say the world (and its people) is dieing, beyond help, too late for intervention? Think of it: there's North Korea and Iran with nukes and developing long range missiles, there's poverty, strife, war and religious persectuion in Africa and the Middle East, separatist movements in Europe, political polarization at home, to name a few problems.

What would you say about our nation at this stage? Judging by the news we seem to be riddled with all kinds of problems. People are terribly upset with the results of the last presidential election while others are elated, media and politicians in unprecedented manner trying to undo that election, serious differences concerning public policies on a variety of issues, both political and cultural, threaten to tear apart the fabric of society and have already split churches, some people are becoming violent in disagreement, not to mention the trillions of dollars of debt the federal government has amassed and what that portends for our posterity; some people are outraged by police conduct while others ardently support the police, some shouting for various sexual "rights" in the midst of more and more allegations of sexual assault and harassment, mass shootings are becoming common headlines while the daily shootings (with many more casualties) in places like Chicago (and even here in Bakersfield)¹ are ignored, and should we not mention terrorist acts and threats, unemployment, poverty, latent and overt racism, homelessness, crime, domestic abuse? What about your personal problems of illness, broken relationships, depression, significant and uncomfortable life changes, financial uncertainty, and what ever else ails you?

The 24 hour news cycle has brought all the ills of the world, the nation, and sometimes individuals, right into our homes and cars and workplaces everyday. The world is a mess ... do you think it's worse than it used to be? Technology keeps bringing improvements to our lives... the digital age has revolutionized communication, transportation, manufacturing, and even medicine. Overall poverty is actually down across the world, fresh water is available to millions

¹http://www.bakersfield.com/news/breaking/three-year-old-killed-in-friday-shooting-identified/article_f71cbcc2-c8d3-11e7-b52a-dbc1627e5c74.html

more, medical care to more, and just about every remote corner of the earth can be wirelessly linked for communications.

So with all the improvements why do we still have so many problems and issues, tragedy and strife?

Why do all these problems persist despite the various attempts by humanity to create programs, governments, and societies that promise peace and prosperity for all? Are people really worse than they used to be? ... Could it be that there is a sickness in the human psyche and soul that will not get well?

Heaven Help Us

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” Is. 64:1. So comes the cry and prayer of the prophet Isaiah some 400 years before Jesus, and I wonder if it couldn't be our cry today. He was one of the returning exiles who had been in Babylon for a generation. They returned home to Jerusalem with high hopes only to be confronted with grim reality: the city and Temple lay in ruins, the country laid waste. People were indifferent or hostile to God, they were returning to same old idolitries that caused their ruin in the first place! mmm... The times were so bad that Isaiah wished the heavens would tear open and God would step to earth. ***“As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!”*** Is. 64:2. Isaiah cried for God to do something about their dire situation.

Many of us recall the expressions of hope and optimism that filled the air in anticipation of the millenium ... that was 17 years ago. Didn't we look forward to the 21st century? Wasn't it going to be a bright new future? Then came the terrible events of 9/11; followed by more war and terrorism; domestic unrest and polarization of people here and abroad; moral relativism has produced a harvest of broken lives, broken families, self-serving leaders, many confused people and contradictory behaviors. People have lost faith in the institutions we used to depend upon: schools, churches, news reporting, government, civic and charitable organizations. Who can we believe anymore and whom can we trust to lead us?

History is a teacher if we can just see the parallels. In some ways our times seem eerily like the first two centuries A. D. in Rome – the very crucible in which Christianity was forged. Jesus was born into the Roman world during the reign of Augustus, grand-nephew of Julius Caesar. It was an era of prosperity and relative peace. However, woven into the fabric of that era, Roman culture was rotting at its very center. Though appearing expansive and full of grandeur, Roman society was falling apart from the inside. In the first chapter of his letter to the Roman Christians Paul ably captures the crumbling reality of Roman

culture that does not glorify God.² *“Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done,”* Rom. 1:28.

It was a culture of moral decadence, where there were no universally accepted absolutes regarding marriage, abortion, or sexual relations, violence and debauchery as entertainment. It was a culture of philosophical relativism. Some believed that there was no truth, or that truth could not be discovered. Others believed that truth began with human reason, but it was abstract. [Others believed truth was revealed by personal experience or emotion – sound familiar?] The result was a confusion about what was right and wrong. It was a culture of religious pluralism. There were various cultic religions, private religions, even witchcraft and the occult practiced throughout the Roman world. A person could worship many other gods, be involved in the mystery religions and the cults, or be totally irreligious. It didn’t matter, as long as they acknowledged the emperor (i.e. the state) as god.³

That was the world into which Jesus Christ was born. What kind of world are children born into today? A few years ago I read an editorial in a national newspaper about “basic values” that are so lacking in our society. Surprisingly, the journalist sounded much like Isaiah, *“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away”* Is. 64:6. Don’t we often wish God would not only hear our cry, but also do something? We want a God who is cosmic and personal, engaged and passionate, to fix things for us and show others that He is relevant...

But honestly, do we want this much God? How often have we cut God down to size, tamed God to fit our own agendas? “Oh God, help me when I need you, but please don’t ask anything of me.” I wonder how many have gone to church, or stayed away from church, in the last decade thinking that God will want to relate to them in a personal way, and *that* might be too much, *that* might reveal the secrets of their heart or move them to transformation. Perhaps the only hope is that some among us will wake up and cry like Isaiah *“...we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away”* Is. 64:6.

You could say it's a heaven-splitting time. Here we are pondering the next step into the future for this congregation, just as the year ahead is fraught with more uncertainties than we could have imagined – we never seem to know how and where all the financial support will come from; we don’t know what will happen when the new freeway is completed; we don’t know how to deal with our changing neighborhood; and there a variety of personal challenges spread

²Robert E. Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 41.

³Ibid, 43-46.

out among us. Shall tomorrow the dawning of a new day, or a sunset on all we hold dear? Shall we enter into a new birth or a continuing slide toward death?

Is There Hope?

Jesus spoke about end times and a new time to come. He told this little story saying, *“But in those days...”* So, when are those days? We know that in His first coming He defeated sin and death on the cross; yes! And yet, ever since, we look for the day when we *“...will see the Son of Man coming in clouds, with great power and glory.”* We still yearn for the day when He will forever put away sin and death and all its consequences. When is that day? And He answers, *“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when...”*

It's a simple story about a man who goes on a journey, telling his watchman to stay awake for his return. They must have lived in a world so uncertain and insecure that he had bolts and locks on the inside of the house which could not be opened from the outside. Not knowing when the master of the house would return, the servant must stay awake to be ready to let him in out of the danger-zone, at any time of the day or night. Just stay awake was his order!

Isn't this a story about our future and present? a story about our hopes? The watchman is, of course, taking care of his food everyday. He washes his face every morning. He takes care of his health. We are taking care of our food, our houses, our health daily. But other than that, any plans, anything positive for the future *in view of our Lord returning?* Ironically the past can tell us something about our future, or at least how to prepare for it. Looking back to that era in Rome (mentioned earlier) we read how Christians lived with moral purity in a world of moral decadence. (Theirs was a radical break with the pagan way of life. Christians were taught to be faithful in marriage, to esteem life in the womb, to preserve castaway children, to be servants of all, regardless of race.) In a world of philosophical relativism Christians believed that the truth about life is found in the story of Israel, Jesus, and the church. (This narrative answered all the main questions about the origin, meaning and destiny of life.) In a world of religious pluralism Christians confessed “Jesus is Lord,” proclaiming his uniqueness as Son of God. (In world that had no firm beliefs, Christians proclaimed “We believe.” In a world that had no ethic, they proclaimed, “We behave.” In a world where there was no belonging, they declared, “We belong.”)⁴

Does anyone, anyone at all, yearn for the coming of Christ in power, to *this* place, to *their* life? Is God absent from our lives when we leave this place just as Isaiah lamented years ago *“No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you...”* Is. 64:7? If we are only maintaining we will not be alert to what is happening around us. If there is a moral decadence and relativism all around us, is it partially the result of our years of ho-hum faith? We're rubbing elbows with

⁴Ibid, 46-51.

all kinds of people who do not yet know God! We may talk of His second coming, but many have yet to hear of His first coming! How will they meet Him if we can't live as his disciples and introduce people to him Him?

Yes, Jesus will come at the end, but it does not follow that he should be absent from what we do now. If we expect Jesus only in the end, then are we co-responsible for His absence in this world here and now? Jesus does not come to us only at the end of time. He came to Mary when she was probably still a teen. He came to the apostles in mid life, calling Peter and John away from their fishing boat, and Matthew away from his cash register and coins. They're not so different from you and me. He came to us in baptism or in that moment we decided to follow Him ... and that's when the world began to change for the better. We need to be awake in the end; and that means being awake, today, each day, for Him to knock on our doors

Hope Is On The Way

Yes, our world often seems a mess and you can institute all the programs, read all the self-help books, pass all the laws, and sign all the treaties you can think of, and still the mess persists. It's as though humans have a sickness of the soul. Some have described it as a sickness unto death. Didn't St. Paul write *"the wages of sin is death"*? We need help. We need salvation. We need a Savior.

There is a longing deep in our souls for goodness, peace, wholeness, and the eternal. It is the image of God seeping through. To place our hope in anything that is not eternal, therefore, will bring only disappointment. To be sure, humans do it all the time – I mean they continually place their ultimate hope in things and people who are as transient as the wind. It reminds me of Paul's advice *"... nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment"* 1 Tim. 6:17. This is the beginning of Advent, a time when we look forward in hope to our Lord's arrival. Advent is an old world giving way, as a new world is offered with the arrival of the Savior. How it turns out hinges on how we receive Him. There is hope for us, hope for our nation, for our world.

Every night we go to bed without any assurance of being alive the next morning, but still we set the alarms to wake up. That's HOPE. Every day when we turn to our Savior, Jesus, without knowing where He might lead, or when He might return in the flesh, but still we take a step... that's HOPE.

***"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope,"* Romans 15:13.**