

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

***What Are You Waiting For?***

*Isaiah 35.1-10; Matthew 11.2-6*

Russ Dean, December 14, 2008



It's a kind of mantra these days. For a culture that raises its generations on everything instant, from grits to gratification -- waiting may be the original sin. I said it just this week. I was at the traffic light, second in line. The light turned green, and I mean to tell you that I sat for two, maybe three full seconds, and the brake lights were still on ahead of me. Can you imagine? Such a waste of my precious time! "What are you waiting for!?" (But I didn't honk the horn. I promise!)

Waiting is a terrible thing. Whether you're waiting on the package to arrive via UPS... waiting on that envelope with this semester's grades... waiting on the doctor's report... or waiting... on... Christmas. There may be nothing worse! (Christmas – What Are You Waiting For!?)

More seriously, it ought to be said that waiting really is a terrible thing. My mother used to say to me, "Russ, don't wish your life away." No matter where I was, what I was doing, there always seemed something else, out there, that was the object of my focus, the focus of my action. Or should I say, of my inaction. Because waiting, impatient waiting, makes us immune to the urgency and the beauty of the present. "I wish I had an X-box 360" (which, of course, did not exist when I was a kid!). Such wishing causes children to overlook the house load of toys they already have. "I wish I were old enough to drive." Such wishing has shortened childhood to the point of near-extinction. "I wish Christmas would get here!" Such wishing causes children, of all ages, to miss the

journey to that great day, and the appropriate expectancy which comes with living in each moment, while keeping one eye trained to the future.

There is a kind of waiting that is helpful. But that kind of expectancy is a difficult discipleship, because maintaining a clear focus on tomorrow, while living fully into today, is no easy task. And the waiting that most people end up doing, morphs into a kind of wishful thinking, some utopian fantasizing. And hope becomes a strategy for escape. Real joy will come... tomorrow. When my ship comes in. When I win the lottery. When the market is restored. When my cancer is cured. When the divorce is final. When this project is completed and I can get back home to my family. When the baby arrives. When my parents understand. When God intervenes. When Messiah comes.

The theology of the ancient Jews was filled with just such escapist hope. Not all the Jews – but many of them – just like Christians today. (But I'm getting ahead of myself.) They were filled with the hope of a tomorrow that would never come. Their expectancy was great. He is coming. Messiah. An “anointed one” who will restore the fortunes of national sovereignty, military security, personal gain. “*Thy kingdom come – on earth.*”<sup>1</sup> When I say a tomorrow that will never come, I understand that the tomorrows many people dream of do come, sometimes. But they are always short-lived and finally unable to satisfy, for they are too narrowly defined, too short-sighted, too self-centered. You see the nation of Israel was returned to its sovereignty – on several occasions after the writing of Isaiah – so only those who understand his deeper meanings find fulfillment in his prophecy. For any theology built on the hopes of nationalism, whether of ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, this is a quotation from the Lord's prayer, not usually associated with Jewish messianic hope, but it occurred to me that this line does reflect that very Jewish hope – that God, through the Messiah, would/will establish, on earth, a kingdom, the nation of Israel, and through it, a world of justice and peace.

Israel or the United States today – any such nationalistic theology will fail to encompass the wideness of God’s mercy, and the depth of God’s grace.

The prophets of old, such as Isaiah, just like the prophets of today, speak in literal language (how else could they talk), but they paint word-pictures that are intended to be understood on many levels... *the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad... like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly...* When you see spring arrive, be reminded of the power of hope, especially when it comes in the desert of our lives. The crocus reminds us of the joy that is here, today.<sup>2</sup> And this joy also longs to transform the desert into a lush garden of equality and hospitality and unity for all people. *The eyes of the blind will be opened... the lame shall leap... the tongue [shall] sing for joy!* What Isaiah is telling us is when we see these signs... we will know the kingdom is coming.

In Matthew’s gospel, John the Baptist is a full-fledged, card-carrying member of the Jesus-is-the-One movement. When we first meet John, he tells us that this man of Nazareth is the One they’ve all been waiting for. Not just a preacher, teacher, miracle-worker... The One: *I am not worthy to carry his sandals*, he says, *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand... he will gather his wheat... but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire* (Matthew 3.11-12). That John believes Jesus to be The Messiah, is without question.

Until he ends up in prison. From these dark, dank confines, the prospects of a revolution of nation-restoring proportion don’t seem very good. The Romans still seem to be in charge. Jesus doesn’t appear to be vanquishing many enemies. In fact, from what

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<sup>2</sup> Though we were unable to find any blooming crocuses for this purpose, there was a display of Paper Whites on the rostrum. This beautiful, white flower was a tangible reminder, to which I pointed several times during the sermon, of the presence of joy among us, even now.

John is hearing it's even becoming difficult to understand who Jesus thinks the enemy is, anymore... *Turn the other cheek... pray for those who use you... love your enemies...* (Matthew 5). No, from where John is now, and what he can see and hear, he's beginning to have some doubts about this Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

In that regard, the old, crusty prophet may have some company in the contemporary church. Many among us were raised on one idea of who Jesus is... of what his salvation means... of how his healings and his touch are known... only to wake up one day disappointed in him. Wake up one day and, in so many words, say cynically with John, maybe even sarcastically: *Are you (really) the one... or (should I) wait for another?*

We miss some of what John really said due to the translation from one language to another. There were two Greek words, both of which mean "another." *Allos* meant "another... of the same kind." I'd like *another* donut, please. Pass that plate back here. I want one more, with all the fat and the same cholesterol that I just had! But the word *heteros* was also used. (You can hear the English words, heterogeneous and heterosexual). It meant of a different kind, altogether. John doesn't ask Jesus if we should be waiting for another Messiah, who does the same stuff that Jesus does – says the same confusing things, acts in the same non-conventional ways, disturbs the pious, welcomes the outcasts. No, John wants to know (and we can see his disillusionment coming through), should we be waiting on a *heteros* Messiah – a different kind of Messiah altogether.

So I started thinking about John's Messiah – you know, the different kind of Messiah that he was expecting, that he was, obviously, wanting. And I wondered if his

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<sup>3</sup> I gained insight into this passage from consulting the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, pp.265-271.

wishful thinking, his escapist reasoning, his nationalistic, utopian scheming is any different from the kind of Messianic hope that many Christians have, today. We hear of a Second Coming, and though it is a return of Jesus that they expect, it is a different kind of Messiah altogether, isn't it? The Second Coming of Christ, as we mostly hear about it, sounds "an awful lot"<sup>4</sup> like the coming of the kind of Messiah John had originally said Jesus would be – a vengeful, judging, apocalypse-inducing savior – who would take us away in vindication, while vanquishing our enemies, in some other-worldly salvation.<sup>5</sup>

This Advent season. As you prepare your heart for the coming of the Christ, you need to hear Jesus' words to John the Baptist, who was disappointed in the kind of Messiah Jesus had become. What he said to John was really, "What Are You Waiting For?" All the salvation you need is right here. When you see it, tell it! When you find it, let it be your joy. All of the signs of which Isaiah prophesied are coming to pass, before our eyes [point to the Paper Whites]. The blind see... the lame walk... the unclean are made clean... the dead are raised... it is true, literally.

Every time Dr. Dan Murrey gives someone back their strength, through the touch of orthopedic surgery, the kingdom has blossoming, again, among us.<sup>6</sup> I spoke with one of our church members this week who has been unable to be in church for several years now. Though disease is wracking her body, step by step, day by day, the joy of her life and faith was so evident as we talked. The signs of kingdom, evidences of Christmas, are

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<sup>4</sup> I couldn't help but use this southernism here!

<sup>5</sup> In editing this sermon it seems that my reference to "other-worldly" is really inaccurate here. John's apocalyptic Messiah was not to be other-worldly at all (see footnote above, regarding the reference to the allusion to the Lord's Prayer). It is Christians who have projected this Messianic expectation into an other-worldly perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Dan is a member of our congregation. When he left on Sunday he said that he appreciated the "shout out" from the pulpit. I said, "Sure... but you ought to hear what I say about you when you're not here!"

showing forth every single day. Literally. Physically. And they are also showing forth in symbolic ways.

Every time a church calls a woman to be its pastor, the shackles of repression are loosened, just a little more. Every time the homosexual is recognized as a human being with infinite worth, inherently, just as she is... someone's blindness has given way to sight. When someone finds in the Word of God, sometimes spoken on your very lips, a living word of inspiration and hope that keeps them keeping on... the dead has been raised.

In his book, *Nonzero*, Robert Wright suggests that perhaps it is up to us to create proof of divinity.<sup>7</sup> Jesus leaves John's question up to John's disciples – you go tell John... what you have seen. For when you can see it, you have within you, the only proof of divinity the world will ever need.

No other Messiah is coming – not one of a different kind, that is – but when we learn to see Christ in the poor and the needy, when we learn to see Christ in the outcast and the downtrodden, when we can see Christ in the triumphs of life that come, large and small, literally and symbolically – then, he has come again.

Joy is breaking out all around you. I promise it is. Yes. The Messiah has come.

What Are You Waiting For?

May it be so!

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<sup>7</sup> “It may literally be within the power of our species to swing nature’s moral scales – which for so long tended to equilibrate near dead even, at best – decisively in the direction of good; maybe it is up to us, having inherited only the most ambiguous evidence of divinity, to *construct* clearer evidence in the future. Maybe history is, as various thinkers have suggested, not so much the product of divinity as the realization of divinity...One theologian has paraphrased Teilhard [de Chardin] as believing that ‘God must become for us less Alpha than Omega.’” p.333

## NOTES

The church never tires of this story, relishing it with both joy and surprise. Why the joy? On one level, the triumph of the powerless over the powerful is always a cheering story. But on a deeper level, the news that God has come to live among us is greeted by bursting joy. And why the surprise? There really should be none because we know it is in God's nature to come to us. God is the One Who Comes to Us. Not on our schedule, to be sure; God's people have always bombarded heaven with the questions, How long, O Lord? Why do you tarry? Must we wait forever? Perhaps the surprise lies not in God's coming but in the manner of God's coming.

Fred Craddock, "The Surprise and Joy of Advent," (LP, Advent, p.6)