

In the movie *Christie* a young and innocent woman from the city travels to the rural mountainous region of Tennessee in the year 1912 to serve as their school teacher. She is immediately astonished by how isolated and poor they are. She struggles to figure out where to begin with this completely uneducated lot and decides to give them an assignment to write down and then talk about what they want to be when they grow up. One girl says she wants to grow up to be rich; rich enough to own two, maybe even three, pairs of shoes.

Now I think we'd all agree that a woman having a second or even third pair of shoes does not have an excessive amount of shoes. I don't know where that line is. Men don't have a clue, and most of the women I ask would probably give me a number about a dozen pairs higher than their current number of shoes.

Perhaps along the same line of thinking is what would you do if you suddenly came into a lot of money, somewhere in the millions. Maybe you inherited from unknown relative or something. Many people say, "If I win the lottery..."

What would you do? On one end of the spectrum is the very selfish - people who would immediately think about the car they would buy, the vacation home they'd get, and the trips they'd take. On the other end of the spectrum would be the selfless - people who would think about what charities they'd support or what civic projects they'd fund. Most of us would fall somewhere in between.

I'm baiting you a little bit because I want to catch you on what Jesus teaches in our gospel reading. If the gospel reading seemed inconsistent to you, you're not alone. In one breath Jesus appears to be saying that the end is coming soon and here are the signs to look for. In the next breath he says there won't be signs and you'd better be ready to wait a long long time. Then in the very next breath he's back to saying there will soon be signs to be seen.

For the last three weeks our gospel readings have been teachings from Jesus that contradict what's taught elsewhere. And here we go again. The only difference is that the last three weeks were from Matthew's gospel and this week we're in

Mark's gospel. In Matthew you'll remember there were much larger literary structures being created to help teach us things. And something similar might be happening here.

Mark Allen Powell, a professor of New Testament at Trinity Seminary in Ohio says this:

"Try this experiment: First, read Mark 13:1-2, 8, 14-22, 24-30. The text flows smoothly, warning Christians to prepare for an imminent apocalypse." (And I can write these verses out if you want to try it.) "Now, [put all the verses together that you omitted]. Again, the text flows smoothly, but it offers counsel of another sort: believers need to dig in, stay faithful, and prepare for the long haul.

Some biblical scholars have taken this and created a theory that maybe the gospel writer Mark had two different accounts of Jesus' teaching about the end of time and he chose to weave the two accounts together. That idea is certainly has precedence. We see it other places in the Bible. Mark Allen Powell says, "Maybe."

I like his "maybe" approach. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians we have to remember that when we read the teachings of Jesus we are reading the teachings of a rabbi from the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Jewish leaders in the 1<sup>st</sup> century frequently held conflicted teachings up simultaneously. They would create a tension between ideas as a way to teach deeper truths. Quite possibly Jesus was doing the same thing here, knowing that through inconsistency a deeper truth is taught.

As for me, I believe Jesus wanted us to hold both ideas simultaneously. Be ready, the end might come at any time. But also, prepare, it may not come for a long long time.

Going back to the starting image of what would you do with a gigantic windfall, most of our thoughts did not include the perspective of, "What would I do if Jesus comes soon?"

If someone were to hand you five million dollars and you knew Jesus was coming on Thursday at 3:00pm how would you handle that money? I think we probably do a good job of thinking long-term, but short term, especially in matters of faith, we don't do so well.

This is about more than just being ready now and in the future. It is also a way of life. As Christians we are right to work hard to create God's will upon earth. We are right to try to improve the conditions of ourselves and other people. But eventually you can improve enough that you do have enough shoes. Or maybe, the point when getting new shoes is no longer any fun.

The way of life that Jesus wants us to have is one that is simultaneously seeking growth and an ongoing discontent; a longing for the future - a drive and a yearning for God's promised kingdom to come. Ideally we would even see death as the next great adventure - to use a phrase from J.K. Rowling.

I hope you are never content enough that you stop yearning for God's promised kingdom to come. If you reach a level of contentment that you stop yearning then I fear you've made your accomplishments into your own god.

And lest we forget, for many, if not most, people on this planet life isn't any fun at all. They hurt. They suffer. They are abused. They worry. They are powerless to bring contentment to their lives. They cannot do what would make them joyful. For them, the sudden inbreaking of God's reign would be the greatest of all joys.

I think that Jesus would say that if you aren't yearning for the end then you're either too comfortable, or you've set your sights on getting contentment through earthly life. That is a misguided mistake. People who do that are simultaneously focusing on themselves and not aiming high enough - as high as God intends to go.

Jesus' contrasting teachings tell us to be ready for the long haul. It might be a long long while. But don't stop yearning for the end to come soon.

Again from Mark Allen Powell, "The season of Advent invites us to wait impatiently for the consummation of hope, longing to know God as fully as we have been known; to see no longer through a dark pane, but face to face; to love as we have been

loved; to experience Jesus Christ *as he is*, and in so doing, to become like him." (Working Preacher 2014)

Amen