

What About the Future?

Acts 3: 12-21,26

**First Presbyterian Church
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For the last month, we have been identifying the deep questions in the human heart. These are questions which we cannot answer by ourselves, though we are desperate for solutions. The answers simply cannot be found *inside* us. They have to come from *outside* us. And not just outside my personal being, but outside of humanity itself.

Of course, as Christians, we have been considering how the answers to life's unanswerables are in Jesus. But not Jesus as a formula for salvation. Or Jesus as an ethic for living well. Or even Jesus as an example of spirituality. Rather, the great, deep questions of life are answered by episodes. The events in the life of Jesus address our deepest concerns. God's answer is a person with whom we can be in intimate relationship. We enter that relationship as we engage the episodes of his life. Let's walk back through these as we take up our final question.

Question: What About? Answer: Jesus Event

Loneliness	-----	Incarnation	Jesus companioned us.
Guilt	-----	Atoning Death	Jesus took our guilt as his own
Death	-----	Resurrection	Jesus conquered death.
Purpose	-----	Mission	Jesus sent us to love and share.
Future	-----	Return	Jesus will return to set all right.

Jesus entered the world on our behalf. The events of his life have saving impact on us. What happened to Jesus can effect us in the present. In the depths. In reality. As we are joined to him. As we are united to him by the Holy Spirit through faith. Jesus is the one man whose life matters most to each and all of us.

So with this in mind, let's take up the final question. What about the future? What's going to happen? Will everything be OK? Is the world going to come out right in the end, or is it all heading towards destruction? One way to ask about your views of the future is, "Do you think things are getting better, or worse?" Here are some quotes. See if you think these are relevant:

- A generation is “weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope.”
- “Dismay is a mainstream concern...the prospect of imminent crisis, a new Dark Age, [is] a habitual way of looking at the world.”
- The[re is] fear that civilization [is] under threat...Decline and collapse, sickness and death, infect nearly every cultural endeavor: intellectual, artistic, literary, scientific, philosophical and religious...the notion of humanity’s moral and spiritual progress [lies] in the dustbin of history.
- “A profound sense of spiritual crisis [is] the hallmark of the decade.”
- “There [is] an erosion of what might be called *civilizational confidence*, widespread disillusionment with the West and its supposed cultural achievements.”
- “I think we are in the rats’ alley, where the dead men lost their bones.”
- “We will not be able to find our way anymore.”¹

Do these statements of where we are and what the future holds sound like they describe the 2020’s? They are indeed about the 20’s: the 1920’s. We often think of that decade as the roaring 20’s. Everyone going to speakeasy’s and dancing in flapper dresses, living it up before the Great Depression.

But historian Joseph Loconte has written that the 20’s were actually a time of deep skepticism about the future. The horrors of the First World War and the subsequent epidemic of the Spanish Flu had shattered the dream of unending human progress. Scientific discovery and technological advance could not save us from each other or the ravages of nature. A Golden Age was not forthcoming. There was a deep crisis in faith in God and what lay ahead. The idea that God is on our side and we are his special people on the way to heaven on earth turned out not to be true, profoundly not to be true.

We’re in a season again of mourning what seems to be lost. Many would agree that our culture appears to be in decline. The future seems bleak. We can’t quite get over the fact that it’s so hard to be a Christian and maintain optimism. Loconte’s book reminds us, though, that some extraordinary Christian voices from a century ago would tell us not to be surprised and not to give up hope. Both C.S. Lewis and Tolkien fought in WW1. They saw astounding human suffering, they lost friends in battle. Tolkien nearly died from trench fever. Lewis was wounded with shrapnel. They returned from the war to depleted, disillusioned England. Many lost all faith. Many wrote books of depressing cynicism. But Tolkien, and then Lewis, would write epic stories of the struggle between good and evil. Their heroes would show weakness, fear, and even defeat. But there was a difference. In

the stories of *Narnia* and *Middle Earth*, unexpected grace would intervene. When all was darkest, there would come “the sudden, joyous turn.”² At the last, evil would be overthrown and the world restored. Tolkien and Lewis draws from the deep well of Biblical hope for the ultimate future.

With this in mind, let’s turn to our Scripture. This impromptu message from Peter may seem an unexpected place to find important news about what’s to come. But I think as we go through it, we’ll find a realistic view of what we can expect in this world and a well grounded faith in why we have final hope.

One day, Peter and John were going to the temple to pray. They passed a crippled man begging for alms by the gate to the temple. He was there everyday for years. This time, Peter and John stopped. They gave him no money, but they brought to him healing. The lame man got up leaping and praising God. A great crowd gathered full of wonder that this chronically disabled beggar was now joyfully well. Peter seized the moment and explained that it was not his personal power that could effect such a miracle. But the power of Jesus. He had their attention. So he told them the story. God sent Jesus to them to show them the way to life. Peter reminded the people that just weeks ago they had called for Jesus to be crucified. He did not hold back. “You killed the Author of life!” Perhaps not the best line for winning a crowd over to your side. But Peter wanted to yank them into the hope for the future that Jesus had secured. Let’s hear his message in paraphrase:

“You killed the Author of life, but in a “sudden, joyous turn” God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses. We saw Jesus alive, and it was his power that brought about this healing. Now look, we’re all part of a story that is much bigger than we are. I know when you demanded that Jesus be crucified, you didn’t realize all that was going on. But I want to tell you. The prophets in our Scriptures predicted that the Christ, the savior, would have to suffer. Jesus’s dying was part of a bigger plan. It was out of your hands. But you are also responsible for what you did. It’s time to get aligned with the truth. You can’t stay where you were. Repent. Change your mind about Jesus. Look away from yourself to him. Turn back to Christ.

“Your sins will be blotted out. And times of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord. Then, you will join us in waiting for the second act of the story. Jesus is in heaven now. But God will send him back to us. He’s going to restore everything. Just as the Scriptures foretold, God will set all things right. You want to be on the right side of that second visit. You want to be for Jesus, not

against him. So, look, God, having raised up Jesus sent him to you. God wants to bless you now and in the future by turning everyone of you from your wickedness.”

Peter’s improvised sermon is extraordinary! He seizes on a present happening to talk about both the past and the future. “Here’s a man with a transformed life. This lame beggar is leaping and praising God. It connects to what God promised long ago and what God did recently through Jesus. And it’s a sign of what God will do in the future. He will send Christ again, to call history to a halt and set all things right. But most importantly, Peter shows how the sign of this future demands an immediate response. Look up. Turn around. Leave your sin like this man left his begging. Enter life. God wants to bless you by turning you from your wickedness.” Words of life. Words to make people furious.

Within days, the religious officials had Peter yanked before them. Once again he spoke about Jesus who died, who rose and who is coming again. “There is no other name given under heaven by which we may be saved” (Acts 4: 12). Next thing you know they had thrown Peter into prison.

No early Christian thought that history was going to get better before it got worse. They understood that Jesus demands a confrontation with the human heart. They knew that the world which rejected Christ would by and large keep rejecting him as he was proclaimed. Why? God wants to bless us by turning us from our wickedness. But that means admitting I have wickedness. I am part of the world that rejects God. I am part of the whole system of human defiance of the will of God. I’ve got to swallow my pride and my rebellion to enter this blessing. We often do not go quietly into such grace.

Theologian Connor Sweeney reminds us that there “remains an ongoing confrontation of good and evil in the human heart and the unavoidable prospect of suffering and death in this life...there are no guarantees in history—no guarantees in progress or politics—even if the final victory has been promised and already won in Christ.”³

God has shown his face to us in Jesus Christ. That means that God is this way, not another way. There are no other gods we may follow. It is Jesus’ future alone that will prevail. The arrival of God in Christ puts us all into crisis. For this is the way reality is. I am not my own. I am not my own god. I don’t get to make up how I want things to be.

God embraced our humanity by becoming human in Jesus. God embraced all creation in taking up as his own the stuff of creation in the flesh, blood, bones, lungs and tissues of Jesus. God claimed back the entire earth by entering it as savior. Think of what this means. He promises to restore all things. To get things back to the way things were before sin marred everything. To put it all right. Only more so, more glorious, more real, more lively. In Jesus, God gives a profound, booming, everlasting Yes to creation.

But think further about what this means. To reject Jesus and his gospel means saying No to a whole lot more than a code of life or an optional way of spirituality. To reject Jesus in the end means to reject creation itself. It means to reject biology, logic, truth, beauty, order, goodness. God has reclaimed all he has made in Jesus. To reject Jesus is thus completely self-destructive. For in the end if we want life, we have it only through the Lord of life who has joined himself to all the stuff of creation. He claims it all. That's why opposition to Jesus always leads to distortion, to marring, to chaos and the taking of life. God has raised the stakes enormously high in coming to us as the man Jesus.

What about the future? Truly, we cannot predict the ebbs and flows of history. We know that the conflict between good and evil will rage until the end. There will be lovely glimpses of our future glory along the way. But also much struggle and suffering. Scripture is keenly realistic about that. Comfort for circumstances being cozy and prosperous is just not there. But something much better claims us. God has acted in Jesus to eliminate the barriers between us and him. He has conquered the enemy of death in his resurrection. And when he returns death and all evil will be restored. He will set all things right.

But if you want the comfort of that future, you're going to have to lay down your arms. You're going to have to lay down your demands that the future serve you. God calls us every moment to repent. To get over ourselves. To surrender to his mission in trust that his future will occur. That change alone leads to refreshment. To breathing the air of heaven amidst the noxious fumes of the world. That turning alone leads to knowing ourselves blessed, kept, and held no matter where history takes us in the short term. A sudden, joyous turn is coming when the Father sends Jesus again. To get in on that joy requires the dramatic, continuous turn of our hearts. That future begins now.

¹ From Joseph Loconte, *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe and a Great War* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), pp. 108, 115, 193.

² J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories."

³ Connor Sweeney, "Abiding the Long Defeat with J.R.R. Tolkien: Faithfulness in a Disenchanted Time." June 2018. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/abiding-the-long-defeat-with-jrr-tolkien-faithfulness-in-a-disen/10094592>