

The Uncertainty of Obedience

We are not called to success, but obedience, as the way to abundant living. What are we called to obey? A Zionist Messianism? A premillennial apocalypse?

MATTHEW 21:1-2, 6-9 (NRSV) *When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ...⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

“Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name

of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

MATTHEW 26:36-39 (NRSV) *Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” ³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” ⁴⁰Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?*

The Word of God for the People of God/Thanks be to God. ~ Title Slide

These two Scripture readings form bookends—parentheses—around Holy Week. The week begins with excitement and anticipation on the street and ends with the disciples sleeping off Passover wine as Jesus prays alone in the garden.

And in between, staying with Matthew's Gospel, Simon Peter brags, *“Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.”* ³⁴*Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”* ³⁵*Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.*

Drink the cup? Deny me—though they slay me, I'll never deny you."

Then, while the eleven were sleeping, Judas brought the Temple Police to arrest Jesus, the disciples awoke, and Peter drew his sword, ready to start the revolution. When Jesus rebuked him and healed the man's ear, Peter, bewildered and disillusioned, fled, and as Jesus had predicted, he denied the Lord three times.

In our Lenten study, Magrey deVega says the disciples chose a path-of-least-resistance—that they were cowardly and *unwilling* to follow Jesus. I disagree. I think the disciples were ready to follow Jesus—were willing to die for him. They just misunderstood where he was leading—just didn't really “get it.” They were willing to put their lives on the line for a revolution to overthrow Roman oppression, which is what they thought Jesus was all about. And they had no “Plan B”.

They were wrong in their expectations about Jesus, and in their disillusionment and confusion, they didn't know what to do; so they ran.

Here's my question: what are we expecting from Jesus? I believe we are willing to obey clear instructions related to something we believe in and to which we

are committed. In other words, our obedience is conditioned by our expectations.

Jewish messianic hopes and expectations involved a military conquest and the establishment of a political kingdom in which Messiah would reign over the re-instated kingdom of David. Messiah would be "Son of David." Given that hope—that expectation—the disciples were willing to follow Jesus—to the death, if necessary.

Jesus never claimed the title, "Son of David." He identified himself as "son of man." But the disciples didn't "get it."

Fast forward to the middle of the 19th century: John Nelson Darby—a lawyer with no theological background or training—develops what has become, probably, the most widely endorsed expectation regarding what commonly is called "The Second Coming," "End Times," "The End of the World," and sometimes, "The day of the lord." The New Testament word is "eschatology:" knowledge of end things.

Darby's expectation is called "Premillennial Dispensationalism." It is the basis of Hal Lindsey's *Late, Great Planet Earth*," and the basis of the popular "Left Behind" series of novels and movies. It is based, not on Scripture, but on John Nelson Darby's manipulation of biblical texts: taking a portion of the book of Daniel out of context and using it as the framework for interpreting the book of Revelation, throwing in some verses from I Thessalonians, and some more from Matthew—again, out of context. It's like trying to put together pieces from several different jigsaw puzzles and come up with a cohesive picture.

But it has been so completely absorbed into Christian teachings that it's not been questioned—it's just been assumed—until quite recently. And it looks a lot like the same messianic expectations held by Jesus' disciples, except with bizarre, apocalyptic imagery. And it has become an obsession for many.

Again, our expectations shape our behavior and our life choices. A late high school friend (and we did remain friends until his recent death, even though we disagreed about almost everything.) was a minister in a different denomination. He espoused Darby's premillennial dispensation expectation. While he was a severe critic of certain political values and practices, he wasn't directly involved in any political activity—he didn't even vote, because he believed there was nothing we humans can do to right the wrongs of this world. We can't "make the world a better place." That won't happen until Jesus returns and establishes his kingdom. The only thing we Christians can do is try to get everybody saved before Christ returns.

Here's my problem with that expectation: is it different from the disciples' expectations—which proved to be wrong? Why would a second coming of the Christ, the Messiah, be different from the first? As Christians we believe Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes; and he came upon Israel unexpectedly, with an agenda totally different than the military/political expectations

they'd held for six centuries. And that's the way Paul described "The day of the Lord:" like a thief in the night: unexpected. Unrecognized.

Back to that \$2 New Testament word, "eschatology:" knowledge of end things. But the word doesn't refer only to "final," or "last." The word also applies to purposes, goals, the end as in the result—a time when God's purposes and intentions will be completed, and human life will be lived as God intended from the moment of creation—life lived fully in the presence of and in fellowship with God.

As Christians, we believe the Bible says Christ will return (it doesn't say when, or how many times), and that there will be an awareness of some sort, a consciousness at some level, that will continue beyond life in this flesh, that it will be a life lived fully in the presence of God. But if the Bible were clear about all of that, why are there so many differences in our expectations? Taken as a whole, if we lump all the New Testament references about heaven, second coming, end times—eschatology—the message is that it will be more than the human mind can comprehend, better than human language can describe.

Too much time has been wasted trying to break secret biblical codes—trying to figure out and anticipate when and where and how things will happen in some uncertain future. If we trust God, why do we need to know? How many "second coming" predictions have come and gone?

Meanwhile, Jesus had some expectations, too: *"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."* (MATTHEW 25:35-36 NRSV)

In Matthew's gospel, the last words on the lips of Jesus are these: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (MATTHEW 28:18-2 NRSV)

In the expectation that Christ is here—that we can experience his presence—in that expectation we can leave the future to God, trusting in God's grace and in the Holy Spirit's guidance and in the fellowship of Christ who will be with us always, to the end of the age. And in that expectation, we can be about obeying Jesus' commission to "make disciples of all nations."—disciples: not just converts; followers: not just believers.