## Advent in August?

**II PETER 3:1-4 (NRSVUE)** ***"This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you [2]that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. [3]First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts [4]and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!"***

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**GALATIANS 5:22-23 (NRSVUE)** ***"…the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."***

Few things raise more questions about the Bible than the passages of eschatology and apocalypse related to what is now called "The Second Coming." Perhaps you've read the "Left Behind" series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

The first generation of Christians, including Paul in his earliest letters, expected Christ to return during their lifetimes and lead an armed rebellion to overthrow Rome and reestablish the glory of David's throne, with Jerusalem as the center from which he would rule the world.

Essentially, it was a re-run of Jewish messianic expectations, because the "First Coming" didn't work. And as II Peter hints, that first generation already was experiencing disagreements over the expectations generated by those scripture passages: ***"…scoffers will come, … saying, "Where is the promise of his coming?"***

But see, here's the thing: Jesus told them all along they were expecting the wrong thing. So, my question is: why would that same expectation be right for any expected second coming?

I'm confident that I can build a case, no matter what number you assign, no coming of Christ—no incarnation of God—no Word becoming flesh—will involve an armed rebellion. In a real way, the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost fulfills all the related promises of the Hebrew Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus.

I recognize that the epistles and the Book of Revelation reflect a post-Pentecost perspective, and refer to sequences and sets of events that we've not seen (or, at least, we've not recognized)—unless… What if we read those writings as timeless metaphor to be applied to virtually any period or set of events in which a manifestation of Christ's presence resolves a clash between good and evil?

[I love the quote by John Dominic Crossan: "My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."]

For example: when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, confronting the corruption of the church's leadership, was

that as much an incarnation of the Word as when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple?

Or, when Dietrich Bonhoeffer led a movement against Nazi Germany, was his arrest and execution as much an incarnation of the Word as when Jesus was arrested and executed because he confronted the powers that be?

How about the life and work and death of Martin Luther King, Jr?

The world seems always waiting for the coming of one who will lead us out of corruption and injustice. In many ways, history itself is not unlike the 500 years before the birth of Jesus—the "first coming." For Israel, it was a time of rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple after Babylonian exile—reestablishing national, cultural, and religious identity. But they never really regained national sovereignty. Oh, there was that brief time—Greece was fading and Rome was rising—Judas Maccabeus led a revolt and began a brief time of autonomy ruled by the Hasmonaean Dynasty. But for most of those 500 years, Israel was a vassal state under the thumb of Persia, then the Greek Seleucid empire, and finally Rome.

It was during that time that the hope of Messiah was born, and during that century of relative autonomy under Hasmonaean rule, an intense nationalism emerged and influenced the direction of the messianic hope. The Christian season of Advent is a time of reflecting on that time of anticipation and waiting—that time of longing and yearning for Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

Our specific circumstances are different. We are a sovereign nation. Our future is in our own hands and depends almost entirely upon whether we can stop being our own worst enemy.

In the early 1960s Robert Bellah introduced the concept of civil religion to the sociological vocabulary. He argued that 'civil religions' had become the main type of religion in the 20th century, as mainstream, traditional religions declined. Civil religions effectively perform many of the same functions of 'traditional religions', except God is replaced by national symbols and political ideologies.

The strongest and fastest growing manifestation of civil religion in this country is "Christian Nationalism." It uses traditional Christian vocabulary, but inserts very narrow, specific belief systems and ideologies as litmus tests of faithfulness and patriotism. Its influence increasingly creates chaos and division, rather than unity and peace. And its style is adversarial and militant, rather peaceful and loving. Worst of all, it has to have an enemy to survive.

And most of us, from all sides, are caught in the tempest, just longing and yearning for an Advent of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. What's missing is a consensus about what will bring about that Advent.

Jewish expectation of Messiah had become nationalistic, and Jesus didn't

fulfill that expectation, which was a primary reason for his rejection. And, in my understanding of Scripture, no manifestation of Christ's presence will fulfil the expectations of any Nationalistic ideology. But a remnant in first century Israel believed the vision of Jesus, and the new movement survived. But even in that first generation, there were those differences—divisions—related to the relationship between Jesus and national identity: "…where is the promise of his coming?"

Jesus had said, "My coming will not produce peace, but a sword. Brother will be pitted against brother because of me" (Matthew 10:34). Sadly, early English translations implied Jesus *intended to* produce a sword and pit brother against brother. But the syntax suggests result, not intention: what results when people recruit Jesus to support and validate what they already have decided to believe and do. The sword is produced, and brother is pitted against brother, when Jesus is used, rather than followed—when Jesus becomes the pawn of human preference, rather than the model of life that reflects the image of God created within us.

So, all of us have messianic expectations. Every four years we go to the polls hoping for a messiah. Every new football coach inherits the messianic hopes of his team and its fans. We all live in anticipation of the Advent of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. I repeat my expectation that no coming of Christ—no incarnation of the Word—will involve armed conflict, except in opposition to him. Christ will not raise a sword; but his enemies will, and probably will crucify him again each time the Word becomes flesh.

But Advent begins with hope. I repeat my question from last week: "Can you imagine what our world would be like if all people and all social and cultural and political processes were modeled after the principles implicit in the Fruit of the Spirit: "*…**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?***"

***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,***
***because he has anointed me***
***to bring good news to the poor.***
***He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives***
***and recovery of sight to the blind,***
***to set free those who are oppressed,***
***19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*** **(LUKE 4:18-19 NRSVUE)**

***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***
***4"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***
***5"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***
***6"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.***
***7"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.***
***8"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***
***9"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."*** **(MATTHEW 5:3-9)**
***'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, 35for 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, [36]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 25:34-36 NRSVUE)**

Can you imagine a world in which those words of Jesus are the norm for everyone? This is Advent in August, because we all yearn for one to come and lead us into that kind of world, with that kind of human relationships. Come, Lord, Jesus!