

BHAG- BIG HAIRY AUDACIOUS GOD:

The Second Coming.

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Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

We don't talk much, in our branch of the Christian faith family, about the 2nd Coming of Christ. Some of you, in fact, may not even know what I am talking about when I use the phrase "2nd Coming."

During his ministry Jesus talked about a lot of different things.

One of the topics he addressed was something called end times. When Jesus talks about the end times he also would talk about his 2nd Coming. Jesus, as he hung out with his friends and taught the crowds about God and life, was saying, "I'll see you around. I won't be done being a part of your life even when I am gone. I'll be back."

If you want to look at some of the places in the New Testament where Jesus speaks to the issues of the end times and the 2nd Coming, turn in your Bible to the 24th Chapter of Matthew. Or the 21st chapter of Luke. Or today's reading from the 13th chapter of Mark.

We don't talk much about the 2nd Coming in our branch of the Christian faith. It's been that way for quite awhile. I remember down in North Carolina there was a little, loud congregation of independent, prophetic Jesus followers. They had a neon sign in their front yard that said they were a Pre-Millennial, End Times, Bible Believing, Church of Prophecy. They always seemed to be talking about the end times. They were always putting ads in the paper about Jesus coming back any day, and how people had better get ready. But in the little United Methodist Church I served, just down the road, we didn't talk much about end times and the 2nd Coming. We were trying to figure out what Jesus meant when he gave us the Beatitudes. And how in the world we could survive together when the men in the Memorial Association were squabbling with the Board of Trustees over the church cemetery. And who was going to be bringing meals in for Ms. Daniels after she got home from the hospital.

Maybe we don't talk about the 2nd Coming much because Jesus said he was coming back but a lot of water has gone under the bridge since he said, "I'll be back. The Son of Man is coming in clouds." We've waited and waited, we keep glancing up at the sky, and Jesus hasn't shown. He's been held up. His watch must be really slow. It's been more than two thousand years and we're still waiting. So it's a little embarrassing.

Like your Uncle Louie, with the new, top-of-the-line Mustang convertible with the after-market performance package. Who always promises he is coming up from Memphis for the weekend. To take you for a spin in the car, push it down the toll road towards Chicago where he has "scored" some tickets to the company's luxury box for a White Sox-Tigers' game. Last summer he said, three different weekends, he was coming up. He was going to take you and your sister up to Chicago for a fantastic summer day in that candy-apple red car, let you hear those pipes rumble under you, hang out in a luxury box at a major league game, and it would all be just perfect. He was all set up to come on three different weekends last summer, but something always came up. You circled the dates on your calendar. He never showed. And now, this summer, he has already missed two different weekends when he promised to be here. So when he calls up and says he is coming, you listen to his voice over the phone, shrug, and think, "Whatever." You'll see him when you see him, but you're not holding your breath.

So maybe we don't talk about the 2nd Coming because the delay is embarrassing.

Or maybe we don't talk about end times and the 2nd Coming because we have seen it done so badly. We have seen people on tv who pretend to know the Bible backwards and forwards, and they have told us that the world as we know it was going to end forty years after the founding of the nation of Israel. Or they have written their books and predicted that Jesus would come back at the turn of the millennium in the year 2000. Told folks to sell their property and store up food for the coming days of chaos. They go on tv, they preach their sermons, they sell their books with their predictions, and it is all embarrassing. They look and sound like religious con men and women.

Or maybe we don't talk about the end times and the 2nd Coming because the whole thing is confusing. We read these passages and we don't know what to think. The book of Revelation talks about battles and the dead being raised and a preliminary judgment and a final judgment and the mark of the beast. Some people want to talk about what the number 666 means and they want to say the universal pricing code on a box of Corn Flakes is the mark of the beast or our Social Security Card is the mark of the beast. It's all a puzzle. So we avoid the whole subject the way I have carefully -all my life- avoided calculus. I can't make heads or tails of it so I just pretend it isn't there!

But here is my question: if Jesus thought the whole subject was important enough to bring up, shouldn't we pay some attention to this? Isn't it possible that Jesus is saying something we need to hear?

And if we think Jesus was just flat-out wrong about the God's timing, if we think Jesus was just flat-out wrong about the timing of his 2nd Coming, how can that be? If Jesus is Messiah, if Jesus is the Son of God, how could he be so spectacularly wrong about God's timing and the 2nd Coming?

We're talking about this today.

Before we look at this section of scripture in Mark, you need to know that the Old Testament is full of references to something the Jews called "the day of the Lord." There would be, the Jews believed, a "day of the Lord."

God will step into history.

God will save the innocent.

God will punish the wicked and evildoers.

God will restore creation.

God will gather his people from every corner of the globe. Bring them together. For a time of worship and fellowship in Jerusalem.

Was Jesus all wrong about this?

Let's look at the 13th chapter of Mark. (Hold on: we're going to move quickly.)

Jesus was right. The temple was about to come down. The Roman army, in 70 A.D., crushed Jerusalem to put down a Jewish rebellion. The city was pulled apart. The stones of the massive temple were brought to the ground. He was right.

Jesus says there will be false prophets: he was right.

Jesus says there will be and rumors of wars: he was right.

Jesus says there will be earthquakes and times of famine. He was right.

A time of persecution is coming for those who love me and follow me, Jesus says. And Jesus is right! There was a short time of relative peace for the early Christian community. In the writings of Paul, for example, we see officials and soldiers of the Roman Empire protecting early Christian leaders and missionaries. By the end of the first generation of the Christian movement, though, popular opinion had turned against the followers of the Way.

Jesus is right: our love for him, our allegiance to him, is going to get us in trouble.

Then, after talking about the dreadful desolation in Judea, Jesus talks about the 2nd Coming:

²⁶"At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰I tell you the truth, this generation^[e] will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³²"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Be on guard! Be alert^[ff]! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!' "

Every time I hear these words of Jesus, I feel like looking up. Studying the sky. Which is what the followers of Jesus did in Acts 1:10 after the ascension of Jesus back to the Father. Remember that? Jesus tells his followers that they will be his witnesses, they will tell the story of his life and his truth and his love to the whole world, and then Jesus is gone. They don't see him. A cloud, the writer of Acts says, hides Jesus from their sight. Acts 1:10-11 says: *They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them, "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*

Every time I hear these words of Jesus, and his comment about *the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory*, I feel like looking up.

But Jesus, you know, is most likely not talking about returning to us coming through the clouds -like some sort of heavenly Boeing 777 approaching the earth. Whenever the Bible is talking about clouds it is usually talking about the shekinah or glory of God.

Look at Exodus 13:21. When the people go through the wilderness, the shekinah or the glory of God goes with them. Guides them.

Look at Exodus 24:15. Moses goes up to the top of Mount Sinai and there is a cloud. God is in the cloud. God is with his people. Partly hidden, partly visible, always beyond our control. But God with us. Traveling with us.

Look at Revelation 21:1-4: ¹*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.* ²*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.* ³*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.* ⁴*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Jesus, who is always with us, who has decided to make his dwelling with us, is going to show up. We won't know when...or exactly how...but Jesus will show up. In a compelling, world shifting, life changing way. Jesus will come to us.

And when he says he is coming through the clouds, I believe Jesus is saying, "I will come the way God has always come: I'll show up. You'll turn around and I'll be there!"

This is going to happen before the generation Jesus is speaking to will have passed away.

Jesus says he will return before his generation will pass away. At first glance you may think he was wrong but think again.

Look at Matthew 28:1-10. After the crucifixion of Jesus his body is put in a grave. On Sunday morning two women, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," went to look at the tomb. Verse 9 says, *Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said.*

Luke 24:13-32. Two men are on the road to Emmaus. They are Jesus followers. They are talking with one another about everything that has happened. About the entrance into the city. About the betrayal of their friend. His arrest. His crucifixion. How everything seemed to go wrong. Then, Luke says, a stranger came up to them and began walking along with them. The stranger is Jesus. But they don't recognize the man walking with them as Jesus. The stranger asks them what they are talking about. They tell him. They tell him the whole story. At the end of the day, when they are stopping, Jesus keeps walking. They ask him to stay with them. The sun is almost down. When it is supper time the stranger takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them. The two men who have been on the road suddenly see that the stranger with them is Jesus. The risen Christ.

Jesus *does* return, you see?

Jesus shows up.

Jesus steps into the lives of people.

Well before his generation has passed away.

This is called, in case you want to impress your friends, *realized eschatology*.

Eschatology is the fancy word Bible scholars refer to any talk about end times. About the 2nd Coming. Realized eschatology means that Jesus has come...and continues to come into our lives.

Jesus keeps showing up, doesn't he? The God who makes his dwelling place with us has Jesus step out of the mystery, out of the clouds, and we stand face-to-face with the One who is grace. Truth. Life.

A man was dying. A friend came to visit. The visitor asked, "Are you fearful?"

The man responded, "Fearful? No. I'm not fearful because of my faith in Jesus."

The visitor said, "As Jesus followers we all have hope that our future is in God's hands."

"Well, I'm not hopeful because of what I believe about the future," the dying man said.

"I'm hopeful because of what I've experienced in the past." He went on to explain. "I look back over my life, all the mistakes I've made, all the times I've turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed, and gotten lost. And time and again, he came back for me. He found a way to get to me, showed up and got me, looked for me when I wasn't looking for him. I don't think he'll let something like dying get in the way of his love for me."

When Fred Craddock was pastoring a church down in Tennessee there was a girl about seven years old who came to the church most weekends for Sunday school. Sometimes her parents let her stay for worship. They didn't come. He was a top executive with a local chemical outfit. Had just moved the family down from New Jersey.

They didn't come to church. Didn't do God talk. Didn't need that sort of thing. They were doing just fine. Moving right up the ladder.

The couple was known for their Saturday night parties. They invited the right people. There was always a lot of drinking. Wild things happened there. Vulgar things happened. Shameful things. People trying to impress...trying to feel alive.

Every Sunday morning this couple's beautiful little girl would be in Sunday school.

One Sunday morning the pastor looked out and there the family was. In worship. The pastor thought the adults with the little girl were just friends but they turned out to be Mom and Dad. After the sermon, at the close of the last hymn, the man and woman came forward to talk with the pastor. They said they wanted Jesus in their lives. Said they wanted to follow him.

"What prompted this?" the pastor asked.

"Well, do you know about our parties?" they said.

"I've heard about them, yeah," the preacher said.

"Well," they explained, "last night we were having a party. Things got a little loud. A little rough. Too much drinking. It all woke our daughter up who was sleeping upstairs. She came downstairs. Saw that we were eating and drinking and said, 'Oh, can I say the blessing? 'God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food.' Then, she stood up, said good night, turned and walked back upstairs.

"The people at the party looked at one another and got quiet. People mumbled something about need to get home.

"We moved around the living room and dining room cleaning up. Picking up the crumpled napkins and the spilled peanuts and empty glasses. My wife stood next to me at the sink. She looked at me and asked the question I was asking myself: 'Where do we think we're going?'"

The 2nd Coming.

It happens.

Has it happened to you?

There is more to this, though.

Jesus is saying something more than promising that he will show up. That we can each experience his 2nd Coming. Jesus is promising that there will be a day, a moment, when the Risen Christ will return in a powerful, visible, obvious way. Jesus will come back and make things right -in all sorts of ways. And the world as we know it will come to an end so that God can begin a new chapter.

They've been showing pictures of some of the animals along the Gulf Coast. Especially brown pelicans. When the pictures come on, I turn away. I can't bear to watch it. I can't bear to see what we have done. We need God, don't we? We need to God restore creation. Put things back where they need to be. Make it better. We need God because we seem really good at making messes, and pretty ineffective when it comes to cleaning up those messes. And sometimes the messes we make aren't in the Gulf of Mexico. But in our marriages... families...churches...neighborhoods.

Jesus will come to reign over all things...in a very visible way. Jesus will come and gather his people. Jesus will come and restore creation. Jesus will come and heal the broken, bring down the haughty and arrogant and violent and unjust. This is something that hasn't yet happened but something that we, as Jesus followers, believe will happen. We call this delayed eschatology. This is something we are still waiting for.

Some of us get tired of waiting on Jesus to come back. Make things right. Gather the outcasts. Lift up the lowly and heal the broken. Bring down the haughty...the mighty...the mean. Some of us get tired of waiting on Jesus to come back.

In the short New Testament of 2nd Peter, the writer talks -in the 3rd chapter- about the fact that some people will laugh at our talk that Jesus will come back. To heal the earth. To restore our broken hearts, remake our souls, and renew creation. In verses 8-9 he says, *Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* A thousand years is like the blink of an eye to God. The way this summer will be over in the blink of an eye for a 70 or 80 year old, but for a 5-year old the summer will be endless. Time is elastic. We may get tired of waiting, but getting tired doesn't mean God will not one day act as God has promised to act.

Some of us get tired of waiting for this final, cosmic, 2nd Coming.

And some of us want to put our lives on hold as we wait for God to show up. That happened in the early Church. Some people quit working. Paying their taxes. Tutoring in the public schools. Keeping the house clean. Some people just stopped because they thought life was just about waiting on God. Counting the days. Some of us want to put our lives on hold, want to stand out in the back yard looking up at the clouds waiting for Jesus to come back and make it all better, but Jesus tells us to stay awake. Be alert. Use these days as a time to get some work done for God.

One of my friends was backing out of his driveway in South Bend. He and his wife were headed for Holland, Michigan to visit his daughter, son-in-law, and three year old granddaughter. As my friend was backing out of his driveway, his daughter called him.

"Where are you?" the daughter asked.

"Just backing out," he said.

“Well,” she said, “Tildie is standing here looking out the window. She says you are coming any minute and she is refusing to take a nap. She won’t leave the window and just keeps saying, ‘They’ll be here right now, won’t they? When will they be here?’”

The daughter said, “Will you talk to her and tell her it will be awhile? And that she needs to go ahead and take a nap?”

Sometimes we get tired of waiting.

And sometimes we are tempted to stand at the window and wait for Jesus.

But God says get to work. Use the day. Live each day. Make the most of your life. Because I’ll be there, soon. And I’ll want you to show me what you have been up to...how you have used your life.

All this talk of a 2nd Coming: what does it mean?

It means the tough times we go through are an opportunity to witness. Do good. Spread God’s truth and love. Invite people to move towards Jesus.

It means we need to be alert. Not go through life half asleep but keep our eyes open. Our heart tuned to the frequency of God’s truth and mercy in Jesus.

It means we need to get to work. Because Jesus is going to talk with us about what we’ve been up to. How we’ve done. How we’ve handled our life and our relationships and our money and our time and our community and our world.

It means God will have the last word. It means that, after all is said and done, Jesus will reign over all things. Over death. Over pain. Over betrayal. Over greed. Over war and violence. Over divorce. Over oil spills. Over selfishness. Over all things. Jesus will have the last word. Jesus will reign!

And it means that Jesus shows up...each and every one of us in this room can experience a 2nd Coming. Whatever road we’re walking, Jesus has this way of slipping up on us, beginning a conversation, and somehow we are never the same.

Even when I am out of your sight, Jesus is saying, you’re not done with me...and I’m not done with you. I’ll be around. I’ll be back. I’ll show up.

Let us pray:

How good it is, Jesus, to have this promise. That we can lean into every and know you are the One who will show up. You are faithful to your promise. How good it is during uncertain times to know you will show up, Jesus, to reign over all things. You will reign over sin. You will reign over death. You will reign over injustice. You will reign over war. You will reign over poverty and anything like the Great Recession. You will reign over cancer. You will reign over despair. You will reign over loneliness. You will reign over divorce. You will reign over the oceans and the seas. You will reign, Jesus. You will have the last word in all things, Jesus, and for this we praise you.

Now, Jesus, gather us up as we come to your table. And be present to us in the juice and bread. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.