

Come, Lord Jesus!

II Peter 3:1-15a

Last week, as we finished up our study of Matthew's gospel, we saw Jesus clearly promising to come again, this time in power and glory, to judge the living and the dead. And every time we repeat the Apostles' Creed, we confess our hope and confidence that He will do just that. So, what's taking Him so long? And as the world careens from one crisis to another, from political strife and war to droughts and plagues, this question only becomes more urgent, doesn't it?

Well, as we see from verse 9 of today's passage, we aren't the first generation to wonder why Jesus keeps waiting. After all, this letter was written close to the end of Peter's life, and he died at the hands of the Romans sometime around A.D. 67. So, according to verse 9, that means that less than 40 years after Jesus' ascension into heaven, at least some of His followers already thought His return was a bit behind schedule. And here we are, almost 2000 years later, wondering the same thing.

Okay, so how does Peter answer this question? Well in verse 8 he says, "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." This points out something that is as obvious as it is mysterious: God doesn't experience time in the same way that we do. In fact, because He created time, He exists outside of it.

How can that be true? Well, we all know that God is in total control of all the events of history. After all, verse 5 reminds us that God is the One Who brought the whole universe into existence simply by the word of His power. And we know that, as verse 6 says, He sent a great flood in the days of Noah to wash the sin from the earth. So we have no problem believing that God has sovereignly ordained and will bring about the end of the world which He created – not this time by water, but by fire, as verse 7 says.

In the same way, we rejoice at the truth that Jesus told us in our responsive reading from Revelation 22: that He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. We know that He is the Word through Whom God spoke the worlds into being on the first day, and we know that He will rule and reign on the last day, the Day of Judgment, when His sovereign Word will pronounce perfect justice to all those who have rejected His righteous rule.

So perhaps it's because God is the creator and master of time, because the Lord therefore transcends both space and time, that Peter can say what He does in verse 8: to the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. And perhaps that's why Jesus can say in Revelation 22: "I am coming soon" – even though it's been close to two thousand years since the Apostle John first heard those words. After all, to Jesus, it's only been a couple of days, right?

Well, all that may be true, but let's be honest. That kind of theoretical, philosophical stuff doesn't really provide a lot of comfort for us, longing as we do for Christ to return and put an end to violence and chaos rising all around us. And we're not alone. No, from the days that Emperor Nero put both Peter and Paul to death in Rome, to the days when Mohammed's followers slaughtered Christians throughout the Mediterranean world, to today when tyrannical governments such as those in Iran and North Korea forbid Christians from any sorts of gatherings at all, true believers have always cried out for our Lord and Savior to return, not some time in the faraway future, but immediately. In fact, Peter may very well have written this passage while he was in prison awaiting his own execution, and we know that John saw the Revelation of Jesus Christ while he was in exile on the island of Patmos. A thousand years may only seem like a day to Jesus, but to those enduring persecution for their faith it's a very long time indeed.

So, why is Jesus taking so long? Why didn't He return before Peter could be martyred in A.D. 67? Why didn't He show up when John urgently prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus" as he recorded the words and visions of the Revelation around A.D. 95?

Well, I guess we're all glad He waited a little longer, aren't we? For if Jesus had shown up at the end of the first century A.D., none of us would ever have had a chance to be born, much less to come to faith in Christ. In fact, think of all the people through all the centuries and from all the nations outside the Mediterranean world who would never have had a chance to hear the gospel at all.

So, even if we can't wrap our minds around the way that God experiences time, and even if we can't thus comprehend what Jesus meant when He said, "I am coming soon" some two thousand years ago, I think we can understand why He has been waiting so long to come back: as verse 9 says, He doesn't want "any to perish, but for all to come to repentance."

So, what does that mean? Simply this: Jesus is delaying His coming so that more and more people like us have a chance to abandon their rebellion against Him and to accept His pardon. In short, He's not going to come back until everyone has been saved who will be saved. Or as Peter summarizes in the first part of verse 15: the patience of our Lord is salvation.

And Jesus' intentions can perhaps help us to understand another confusing part of this passage. For in verse 12, Peter doesn't just urge us to take comfort in the midst of our sufferings by looking forward to Jesus' return with eager anticipation. No, Peter also tells us to "hasten" the coming of that great day. In other words, while we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," there seems to be something else we can do to speed up the process.

What could that possibly be? Well, we've already learned that the only reason Jesus is waiting so long to return is to make sure everyone has a chance to repent. And in fact, this agrees with something Jesus Himself said back in Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come." In other words, until all the peoples from all the nations all over the world have a chance to hear the good news of Jesus and to turn from their sins and trust in Him as Savior and Lord, Jesus won't be coming back.

Ah, but who did Jesus give the responsibility to go to all the nations with the good news? Who is supposed to baptize them and make disciples of them and teach them everything that He has commanded us? Well, in the very last verses of Matthew's gospel, Jesus Himself, the One Who has all authority in heaven and on earth, gave that commandment to His followers, to every one of us. So, if we are longing for Jesus to return, if we urgently cry out with John, "Come, Lord Jesus," we need to be just as busy proclaiming the good news to the ends of the earth, making sure that everyone has a chance to repent of their sin and trust in Christ. Because He's not going to come back until that happens.

Okay, so how can we get busy about the job Jesus has left for us to do? Well, of course we can support the work of church planters and missionaries, those who are reaching out to the unchurched or de-churched, or to those who have never even heard the truth about Jesus in faraway places. And of course we can learn some evangelistic tools that will help us share the good news with our own friends and neighbors who need to know Christ or to know Him better. And we'll get to some of those things over the next few weeks.

But isn't it interesting that in this passage Peter takes a completely different tack? Yes, at the beginning of the chapter, he reminds his readers to keep their focus on the words of the prophets and the apostles. He wants them to be grounded in the truth of the Old and New Testaments so that they won't be led astray by the worldly scoffers and mockers who doubt whether Christ will ever return. And

in our modern world, where so many mutually contradictory truth claims come at us from every side, it's all the more important for the inerrant, infallible Word of God to form the firm foundation of every aspect of our lives, to be the only and sufficient rule of our faith and practice.

But the main conclusion that Peter draws from the fact that Christ is certain to return is the way his readers should go on living until that great Day of Judgment. In other words, we aren't just supposed to remember and to repeat what God's Word says: we are to put it into practice in our daily lives. And it is certainly the case that the example we set is an indispensable part of our witness to those who need to know Christ or to know Him better.

For think about it. How can we expect others to believe that this world will be burned up by fire unless we ourselves are focused on the new heavens and the new earth? In contrast, if we go on living as if this world is all that really matters, why should the scoffers believe us when we say that Jesus will one day bring all of it to an end?

And how can we expect others to turn away from the sort of lustful, self-centered behavior Peter mentions in verse 3 unless we ourselves are seeking to live according to God's perfect law of love for Him and for one another? Unless we who trust in Christ are ourselves without spot and blameless as verse 14 describes, why should anyone else listen to what we tell them about the need for repentance and discipleship? And unless we ourselves are living at peace with one another, and unless we are reaching out in care and concern to those who haven't yet put their faith in Christ, why should we expect anyone to abandon their rebellion against Him, surrendering to His sovereign authority and receiving His grace?

No, since Christ's return is certain, we must live on this earth with heaven in mind. And the good news is that the more we ourselves repent of our sins and trust in Christ to save us, the more we ourselves express our thanks to Him by obeying His Word and seeking to live according to His will – in short, the more our personal example agrees with the gospel that we proclaim, the greater the reason unbelievers will have to accept the truth of that gospel. The more consistently we ourselves follow Christ, the greater the chance that others will come to follow Him as well. And the more people that come to true repentance, the sooner Christ will return.

So, yes, we have a story to tell, a marvelous story of a patient Savior Who wants everyone to repent, as well as an urgent story of the coming Day of Judgment. But unless we live as though we really believe this story to be true, unless we devote ourselves ever more consistently to the glory of Christ and the good of those who need to know Him or know Him better, why should we expect anyone to believe us? So, let's not just say the words, "Come, Lord Jesus." Let's live out that longing as we do our best to make disciples of all the nations, not only with our lips, but with our lives.