

FUTURE PERFECT

A Sermon on Luke 21:25-36—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart

November 29, 2015—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

I recently found a framed photo of my family in the closet. The glass was broken, the picture was scratched by the shards; it was a real mess. It's too old to have in digital form, and I don't think I have the negative, either. As I threw out the broken glass, I thought to myself: "I hope I will be able to get this restored. I hope that I will have had this fixed someday and hang it up again."

1. Hope falls somewhere between what we yearn for most and what we believe is possible in the future. Hope connects us to a future and allows us to persevere through suffering and hardship, because we believe that we are called to this hopeful place. Hope enables women to give birth to children; hope enables cancer patients to undergo chemo and radiation treatment. Hope empowers many elderly people and people potentially of all ages to come to peace with their mortality. The mother-to-be hopes for a future with or at least for her child; the cancer patient hopes for longer and good quality life; a dying person hopes for a meaningful future for those they leave behind.

Hope is the middle sibling of the three eternal principles from Paul's thirteenth chapter to the Corinthian church. "Now, faith, hope and love abide," Paul writes, "these three, and the greatest of these is love." But the other two are significant too otherwise he wouldn't have mentioned them in the same line as love. These three actions abide, they remain with us: rust doesn't break them down; moths can't eat them up. Hope can thrive eternally. Which is something I tend to point out to families at funerals and memorial services. If their loved one hoped for life everlasting, and that hope is fulfilled by God through such life everlasting, then the hope of those loved ones left behind naturally connects them even more to the one they lost to death.

But I speak even more about hope to couples as they get married. Love is the foundation of a lifelong relationship, but a family can't thrive only on love just like a family probably doesn't want to live on a foundation for a house without the house built to live for the long-term. Hope is like the walls that make the home a settled place of living and loving, hope is like a wall with nails, a place to ready to hang up framed pictures: perhaps of children growing up, pictures of the couple with neighbors, photos of them traveling, pictures of them helping their friends and family. Hope in marriage is that agreed upon vision of the future that by a combination of hard work and God's grace may come true and the simple idea of that future brings life to the relationship.

Hope is imagining that something will happen and to frame one's life around working toward that imagined picture of the future. We express hope when we speak in the future perfect tense: "Once I will have finished my homework, then I can go out and play." "Once she has gone to sleep, we can wrap her birthday presents." Future perfect is how we speak about an anticipated, a hoped for future event, as though it has already happened. Future perfect expresses something in the future being complete.

2.

Today's scripture reading is kind of like an exercise by Jesus (and I guess Luke in writing it down) in future perfect-ness, in future perfection, more specifically in the completion of human history. In the future, Jesus says, there will be signs all around you that something important is about to happen. In order to make it as clear as possible, Jesus says, I'll use all sorts of methods: cosmic signs (sun, moon, stars); meteorological signs (roaring of the seas); psychological signs (people distressed, fainting). Then the Son of Man (we take that Jesus

means himself) will come in a cloud with great power and glory. It's right then that you should lift up your heads, look up, because something is coming near, and Jesus calls this something your redemption.

Be alert then because this could happen at any time. Keep sober and vigilant. And pray that you have the strength to escape the things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Now I know that having heard some of the reading a second time you may be saying, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, Adam!" Did Jesus really think that? Is that really part of Christian faith?"

The short answer is yes, this has been a part of Christian faith for most of the 2,000 years of our faith. This is a prediction that Jesus will come back to end human history as we know and to usher in a new age either on this earth or as it's spoken about elsewhere on a new earth to go along with a new heaven. Yes. That's what Jesus is talking about or at least what Luke recalls Jesus talking about. This is one biblical account of the eschaton, the last things in human history as we know it.

3.

I know this may sound freaky to you. Let me explain to you why this may be freaky to you. You see our 18th century ancestors in faith in Connecticut would not have freaked out about this. This was relatively universal in Christian faith. People were really specific about what exactly they thought would happen leading up to Jesus coming back. Some thought that Jesus would show up and then there would be a thousand years before history ended; others, eventually churches like ours, believed that for a thousand years some things would happen and THEN Jesus would show up.

People also reflected on what would happen in those thousand years. Churches like ours especially later in the 19th century started thinking, humans are going to keep making things better and better

on earth, so maybe what Jesus and others said in the Bible is that we humans will make life much, much better—human progress would reign supreme—then Jesus will show up and say, "Thanks, guys, for all your good work; I'll take it from here," and usher us into heaven together. The other opinion was that Jesus shows up and then things get worse before they get better, much worse: a bunch of world crises would transpire—stars falling like in the Book of Luke, an Anti-Christ taking over like in the Book of Revelation, an Empire builds an impenetrable Death Star in the Book of Lucas. People dying all over. Bad news, until Jesus eliminates all bad guys, then those few who are left get to go with Jesus into heaven.

Christians disagreed around whether things would get better or worse before Jesus came again, but they agreed that a) things would change and b) Jesus would show up. Our tradition was squarely in the things getting better camp. Our faith ancestors had **hope** up through the early 20th century that God would use us to keep improving the world, keep improving human life, until an almost perfect future, and then this would bridge human history to Jesus coming, but who wouldn't need to do that much at the end of time. Our ancestors had hope in Jesus but at least as much if not more hope in human progress.

But then the 20th century started to happen: World Wars I & II, the threat of nuclear warfare. Even before Vietnam and the present age of terrorism, it became pretty tough for people of faith and conscience to subscribe to this idea that humans are making unstoppable progress. Meanwhile, people began to question more and more the literal interpretation of the Bible. This left us without a bridge between this age and an age to come with Jesus back to complete history.

At the same time, we tend not to believe that God would want the earth to devolve into chaos until things got so bad that Jesus had to show up to put an end to human history. We certainly haven't

been trying to bring some sort of cataclysmic end time about. What we've seen in ISIS in the past months is a group of people brainwashed that a few verses in the Koran mean that it's their job to bring an apocalypse now, that the one God calls them to use any heinous means necessary in order to bring human history to a close. We are a people without a religious sense of the end of history finding ourselves opposed by people with a very intense notion of end times.

ISIS has tragically abandoned the imperative to love God, neighbor and stranger that is at the heart of all three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. ISIS, like other apocalyptic groups, believes that they are central players in the climax of human history. They're like the kid who thinks that THEY must put the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle, that it's their job to make this age complete. Look, daddy, they want to say, I finished it! Daddy, aren't you so proud of me? No, God is not proud of what you've done. And it likely won't bring about the end of the world; no of us is that important; but you have already and probably **will** again cause the suffering of thousands of innocent people (we also must be careful to not think we can eradicate this evil, for that's also impossible and will more likely cause the suffering of innocent people, which then renews the cycle).

4.

The question for people of Christian faith over the centuries and for us today is where do we hang our hope, most specifically our hope of salvation, our redemption? Do we believe that human progress will save us? I believe that humans have made progress in certain ways but that this progress does not change the overall problem of being human. Neither YouTube nor some Convergence between humans and machines will make us truly better people, closer to God or God's kingdom. Do we

believe that Jesus will come to save us as things fall apart? I don't know if Jesus would be waiting for us to mess things up and then show up at the last second to play the hero.

What I do hope is that through Jesus Christ God will redeem us. To redeem us, we both are incapable of saving ourselves but are worth being saved. We are like my broken picture, in need of restoration, but worth the cost. Whatever love it takes to keep us in communion with God, that is what God does for us through the love of Jesus; that's what Jesus calls us to do in this life, to love God, neighbors and ourselves with all our heart, soul, strength, mind. Not perfectly but with hope.

Today I hang up a picture of Jesus as my hope. This picture of Jesus is like the one you know where you first think it's an old lady, hunched over and looking down, but then you see the features of a young lady, poised and looking beyond the frame to meet her husband. In my picture, at first I make out the little baby Jesus, lying in a manger, flanked by parents, barnyard animals, shepherds and angels; but then it's also the grown Jesus, majestic yet hanging on a cross, head drooped down from the weight of the crown of thorns and the weight of tragedy. Then I see the Risen Christ, real with the wounds but also almost lighter than air with resurrection hope; and then finally Christ who meets his bride who hopes in him, Christ who at end of life or the end of history, fulfills that hope. This picture may have had its glass broken by the reality check of the 20th century; it may have been changed as we see differently and less literally the ways that Jesus may come again; it may no longer show me a future perfect by progress or chaotic with some sort of holy violence. But it gives me a vision of hope for the future that also gives me hope for today, that my life means something to the one who finds us hopeful of redemption.ⁱ

ⁱ Inspired by Chapter 5 of Thomas Long's *Preaching from Memory to Hope*.