

...it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep

Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11–14

Matthew 24:36–44

Text: Romans 13:11-12

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.

Introduction

Richard Bratby is a classical-music journalist and concert manager. He recently published an [essay](#) on the music of the Scottish composer Sir James MacMillan and described MacMillan’s 2021 Christmas Oratorio, comparing it to his Fifth Symphony, “as a work as weird, as grand, and as ravishing as the Fifth Symphony, but with an added layer of gloriously eclectic abundance—a sonic banquet, from a composer who understands that Christmas is a celebration on a cosmic scale.”

1. Christmas is a celebration on a cosmic scale. I sometimes find that while much is made of Christmas both in the church and in our culture we have lost sight of the cosmic scale of the event of God coming among us in the Babe of Bethlehem. We tend to be caught up in the horizontal aspects of Christmas; the sights and sounds and smells, the thrill of a newborn child, the story of a manger and shepherds and wisemen. And there is nothing wrong with these things. But we mustn’t let them distract us from what is happening in, what seems to us, the cosmic background.

The message of Jesus’ preaching is characterized, in its essence, as “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17) Something of cosmic scale is occurring right before your eyes, according to Jesus. For the people who heard Jesus preach the world did not appear to be shifting on its axis; the landscape remains the same, the necessities of life still needed to be provided. What is Jesus talking about?

Another way of understanding Jesus’ claim that ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near’ is in the Apostolic witness that in Jesus the long promised ‘age to come’ has arrived. We read about the promised new age from the prophet Isaiah, “He (God) shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation

shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” In our reading from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Roman, he calls on believers in Jesus to recognize this period of time in which they are now living as of great eschatological (cosmic) significance, for it is the time when God has inaugurated ‘the age to come’ in ‘this present existing age.’

According to the Apostles, the ‘age to come’ is happening now, it is this kingdom of heaven that has drawn near. We are in it whether we perceive it or not. The next great event of this age to come, inaugurated in the coming of Jesus into the world, set in motion at the cross making it certain in resurrection, is the return of our Lord in glory when what we now perceived by faith shall be seen. The fact that it is perceived by faith makes it not less certain than the kingdoms of this world. It isn’t iffy—it is the kingdoms of this world that come and go. This is why the apostle Paul reminds believers, “you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” The alarm clock is sounding, the age to come has arrived, God came among us in Jesus of Nazareth, wake up!

I know it isn’t everyone’s favourite kind of writing, but I am fond of J.R.R. Tolken’s trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the movies that were made depicting this story. One of the appeals of the story for me is the cosmic scale on which things happen. Ordinary events on the ground are caught up in the significance of cosmic events; a hobbit carrying a ring shaping the future of middle earth; evil is to be defeated and life restored through the fellowship of the ring. I marvel at Tolken’s imagination to create such an epic adventure.

I am convinced that Tolken’s imagination that created a story on such a cosmic scale was seeded by another story of truly cosmic proportions—the true story of God coming among us in Jesus Christ. Tolken was a believer and a friend of C.S. Lewis; he was instrumental in Lewis’ coming to faith. When I watch *The Lord of the Rings* movies scripture passages come to mind particularly from the book of Revelation.

Friends, will you entertain my suggestion that we ought also to read the biblical story this way; to apprehend the cosmic significance of what we find. Each believer who comes to faith is an instance of an event in this kingdom that has drawn near, an event that is cosmic in its scale. Each believer caught up in this epic of heaven is now part of that unending eternal story that our Lord secured in his life, death, and resurrection. For a believer who clings to faith in Jesus Christ the ordinary events of the day to day of this life are but the flyleaf on the cover of the book that is to be written of her life in the eternal purposes of our Lord. What

the believer knows by faith is that in the coming of the Babe of Bethlehem and what he would do, “the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.” Tolken’s book was a trilogy, and a trilogy will never contain the full story of the wonders of all that is to be written of the believer’s life; books will simply keep on being added.

Is it any wonder that Paul reminds us “it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.” Or that Jesus would say, ‘be ready.’ The Scottish composer got it right, Christmas is a celebration on a cosmic scale.

2. Last September a [story](#) was published about Dr. Stephen Iacoboni, an atheist oncologist who returned to faith while treating cancer patients. In 2022 he published his book, “Telos: The Scientific Basis for a Life of Purpose.” The witness of one of his patients, as that patient was dying, was a pivotal part of his journey back to faith such that Iacoboni began researching intellectually why what he was taught was in complete opposition to what he was observing. He soon found that the science he had a firm belief in was flawed and missing key evidence for its theories, even though the theories were touted as fact. Contrary to what he was taught, Iacoboni observed nature and noticed life to be brimming with purpose and intention. It was full of telos (Greek word), meaning end or an ultimate purpose.

We read today Jesus’ teaching about the unpublished date and time for the coming of the Son of Man—what we call our Lord’s second coming. ‘No one knows the day or the hour except the Father, said our Lord.’ Jesus was answering questions his disciples asked regarding Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The disciples ask him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3) Our reading today was part of Jesus’ answer to the second part of the disciples’ question regarding Jesus’ coming and of ‘the end of the age.’ The word translated ‘end’ in this Greek word ‘telos’ and indeed has the idea of ultimate purpose, goal or objective.

Keep in mind that, biblically speaking, these two ages overlap now. ‘This present age’ and ‘the age to come.’ ‘This present age’ is ended at the consummation of ‘the age to come,’ at our Lord’s return. In other words, the end of the present age corresponds to the end or goal or purpose of the age to come. We have a foot in both ages but our weight is not evenly distributed; we lean to the age to come. You want to be awake to this age to come, to live your life in view of this great

consummation. That is what it means to be ready. This is what Isaiah means when he says, ‘come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!’

Some might say, “but I don’t see it.” I don’t see this kingdom Jesus talked about or the age to come the disciples spoke about. I see the jurisdiction we call Canada and other jurisdictions in the world. The gospel answers that the reality of the age to come is apprehended by faith and is the work of God’s revelation, his self disclosure to us. I want to say to you that the knowing of faith knows more surely than any other sphere of knowledge. Culturally, we are under the impression that the knowing of science is more sure. Take physics as an example. Its history traces back to Aristotle. Early modern physics emerged with Galileo. As things progressed Newtonian thought dominated the field, then Einstein came along and now we have particles. Will particles be the last word about physics? Physics keeps on developing with no last word. Is Jesus Christ the last word of God, the complete word? The gospel says yes. Faith knows more surely than any other field of knowledge.

In the scriptures the chief characteristic of the living God is that he speaks. Thus, in the gospels hearing takes precedence over seeing. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. This does not mean that seeing is unimportant. It is that hearing informs our seeing. There is nothing glorious about a naked Jewish man beaten and dishevelled hanging on a cross at a city garbage dump. It is as you hear the gospel that you apprehend that in this sight we see the glory of God— God’s love for us most characteristically on display.

In Dr Iacoboni’s book he says he observed nature to be brimming with purpose and intention. One example he offered is the emperor penguins. These penguins walk 60 miles on ice to get food and they fill up their stomachs and they walk 60 miles back and regurgitate the food for the chick,” said Iacoboni, “Why do they do that? Not only do emperor penguins endure this physical labor to breed their young, Iacoboni’s book also showed that they have an innate understanding of thermodynamics in incubation: “Emperor penguins, which huddle together in an Antarctic blizzard, each one rotating in their turn from the center to the other rim of the circle and back again, sharing the cold and shielding each other in the most hostile environment on earth. How did they figure that one out?

Indeed, nature is brimming with purpose and intention. But what does that mean? I point out that Dr. Iacoboni had already returned to faith when he launched his research work to explore what he had been taught about the world. This is consistent with the logic of the gospel. God discloses himself to us as our Saviour

in Jesus Christ and then we learn that he is also our Creator. Israel is rescued from slavery in Egypt and then learns that the one who is their emancipator is also the creator. Faith informs what you see. Hearing takes precedence. (By the way, this is why we dedicated so much time in worship to hearing scripture read and expounded in sermon).

The Apostle John tells us, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” God is hidden. Yes, the disciples saw Jesus of Nazareth and to see him is to see the Father. But he is hidden from sight to us now. In the Bible the gods who are seen are no gods at all. The gods who are seen are gods we humans can control. The true God who is hidden cannot be controlled. A moment ago, I reminded you that according to the gospel, the chief characteristic of the living God is that he speaks. According to that same gospel every human being is the subject of God’s personal address. We can ignore that address, shove it to the side, disdain it, plan to get to it later but in the end no human will be able to say, God didn’t speak to me.

We should heed the Apostle. “It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”