

SUNDAY, MARCH 16, 2025 | LENT  
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT  
YEAR C

<i>Old Testament</i>	Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 27
<i>New Testament</i>	Philippians 3:17–4:1
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 13:31–35 or Luke 9:28–36

## Living Our Hopes

### Sermon for South Yarra Community Baptist (online) by Geoff Leslie

There's a kind of fatigue that arises when promises you are waiting on don't eventuate. Abraham is remarkable and a great role-model because he kept on hoping and believing until he was 100 years old with very little to show for it.

But promises and hopes begin to affect us even before they are fulfilled. Living for the hope of a promise inscribes a dimension to a life that self-interest and survival and going-along don't. Our eschatology always shapes our lives – if we dream of prosperity and luxury without a thought about the planet or anybody else, that will shape how we live. If we expect Christ to come and set the world to rights with justice, compassion, reconciliation and love, that is how we will live.

A well-articulated promise functions like MLK's dream – paints a picture of a future that resolves the suffering and oppressions of the present time.

A promise of a future like the promises given to Abraham shaped his life. The texts about God's promises to Abraham in Genesis sometimes stress how big his family will be and how much land they will own, but in at least two places the reason for that is given: God says, I will bless you so that you can be a blessing to all the families of the earth. (Gen 12:3; 18:18) The promise thus becomes a calling, a mission, an ethic, a guiding light. 'God wants to work through me to bring blessing to my neighbours.' That could be why Abraham was reluctant to endorse God's plan to destroy Sodom. It could be why he honoured the indigenous priest Melchizedek and lived peaceably with people of other faiths. He had a promise and a dream that shaped his life.

In the Luke reading, Jesus gets a bit of friendly advice from some Pharisees who for once are not painted as bad guys but are concerned allies, 'you had better leave quickly or Herod will get you'. But he is living for a dream of a particular version of the KOG; in the verses before our reading he says it will be a time when people from all over, from far away, come to feast at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that privilege won't count and the last shall be uplifted to first – it is inclusive and reversing of the status of many people. So he says to the Pharisees, thanks but no I won't stop, I have a mission. His life is shaped by his understanding of God's future, not the perils of the present moment.

I am especially drawn to the Philippians reading. It says, Our citizenship is in heaven, from there we await the coming of a Saviour, the Lord, Jesus Christ. We are eagerly looking forward to his arrival, because he has the power to bring absolutely everything back under control.

I was brought up in a church that loved to preach on the Second Coming. They had all the charts and the diagrams and there was a feverish expectation that, what with Israel now grabbing Jerusalem, we only had a few short years, days even. All the songs reinforced that: Soon and Very Soon, It Won't be long, He's comin' back, I wish we'd all been ready, Thief in the Night, Left Behind – a whole subculture built on the idea.

The decades rolled by and the expectation never happened. Was that living for a promise? I am very critical of it because of the way it was understood: It meant that there was no incentive to invest in anything on this earth. As Larry Norman said in a concert once, Why would I entertain people if the earth is about to be torched? Because the end we looked for was sudden, discontinuous, the good people removed in the rapture, the left-behind judged and punished. So Why invest in culture? Why stand for local government? Why care for the earth? Why build community? It was escapist, it was world-denying, it was so confident ... and it was wrong. My father never thought he'd need a funeral...

I just can't keep up that fervent expectation. Can you? The fashion has subsided now. Churches are not singing songs about Christ's return much, and are not stoking the expectation except for a few determined TV preachers who make money out of panic-buying.

In 1844 there was the Great Disappointment – William Miller calculated Christ's return as coming in 1844 – millions were swept up in the hope – and many of them tried desperately to save face afterwards with lame rationalisations. One group became the Seventh Day Adventists who explained that in 1844, Christ moved from the Holy Place to the Most Holy Place in the Heavenly Temple on that day. Another group, which became the Jehovah's Witnesses kept finding reasons to push the date ahead, finally settling on 1914. They still teach that something amazing happened that year: Christ began to reign in 1914 as the 144,000 was complete.

Aren't we all a bit disappointed? Isn't it a bit embarrassing that we keep saying he's coming back, but he doesn't? What I have done in my head is to change the way I read this Philippians text:

1. *Our allegiance is to a quite different world — heaven itself* It is about allegiance. – the word is politeuma, citizenship. In Philippi, hundreds of veterans and other Roman citizens were dumped into the region to create a little Roman colony – probably displacing the native Thracians of Macedonia from their quiet rural lives. These people lived in Macedonia but their citizenship was in Rome. That affected the way they ran the place – Roman rules, customs, order, décor, justice. Paul is suggesting that that's our game: living on earth but with our citizenship where God dwells and reigns, our true Lord is not Caesar or whatever patriot is running the country but Jesus Christ and that affects the way we live – the rules we live by, the habits we cultivate, the attitudes we foster.
2. *"From there we await the coming of a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ to planet Earth to bring absolutely everything back under control".*  
We were so misled by the unhelpful doctrines that Jesus was coming to take us all away and then the earth would be burnt up and God would house us for eternity in some completely new place. Eschatology can be world-denying or world-affirming. It is world-affirming if we believe that the coming of Christ restores and renews the earth, sets things to rights, including us but

also including all nature. This eschatological dream is not escapist. It is more like MLK's – a vision of earth set right. When we live into that dream, when we hold to that promise and let it shape our lives, it doesn't make us narrow-minded evangelists (Plucking a few lives from the fire) or world-denying cultists. It encourages us to love the earth, to show compassion and welcome to all our neighbours and to generate as much love around us as we can.

Jurgen Moltmann says the modern world has two powerful tendencies when thinking about the future: There is a conservative impulse, that tries to stop all the changes and get things back to what they were – tries to hold off the evil until Christ comes back, often looking for a populist champion who will disrupt and cause all those lefties to lose it. And lets all get armed because Armageddon is coming.

And there is a progressive impulse that imagines a world with no borders, no barriers, everyone living in peace – the end of history because everyone is prosperous and safe. A global economy, a global ethic, a global society that means global peace. But we are losing faith in progress. Pursuing utopias always generates losers – the unemployed whose jobs have been mechanised, and the winners – global billionaires -- are not inspiring hope and confidence for the future of the world. The system is full of contradictions and failures. And nature, poor planet earth is so constantly mined and exploited and presumed upon – it has begun to protest more often with more severe fires, floods and natural disasters.

We follow neither of these impulses – not the Conservative belligerence nor the Progressive project, if I read the Bible right. We wait for a Saviour who will bring the Kingdom of God – a kingdom of which we see many foretastes and which we strive to live for in the here and now.

Many parts of the Bible talk about life 'in that day'. It seems to me they didn't have a clear revelation about what God would actually do so much as the ability to say 'what would this society, this nation, this world look like if God were to come here and now and set everything right?' Some of the notions they came up with include:

In the kingdom there is **equality** – all the nations will stream hand in hand to the mountain of the Lord, says Isaiah. People will come from East and West and feast at the table.

In the kingdom humans will be **spiritual** – we will be aware of God's reality and live appropriately, we will sense the goodness and Godness in all things and not just be material beings. We may even have spiritual bodies as Paul says, whatever that means.

In the Kingdom, if there is farming, it will be in **harmony with nature**. Wild animals will share our land and there will be no fear, the land will be honoured. The OT phrase is 'every man under his own vine and fig-tree' – a phrase rich in possibilities and important themes.

In the Kingdom, **ethnic differences are celebrated** not obliterated. Every different language and culture seems to be cherished by God who encourages people to worship in their own language, tongue, and style.

So these kinds of qualities, gleaned from lots of passages, point to the eschatology, the promise, the dream that shapes us. This is what then shapes our lives, drives our energy, guides our choices. We will always get it less than right, but whenever we can create a sense of living in the kingdom now, we are able to anticipate, celebrate, experience God's dream a little bit.

When the farming community in which I was pastor went through the great drought of 2006-2009, our church had a major shift in direction. We had been a typical Baptist church, evangelising, discipling,

caring for ourselves, praying for drought's end. Then it became as though God said, The drought is not going to end just yet, stop pleading for it; I have placed you in a hurting community to be my people. What can you do about it? So we began to build community, to care for hurting people, to run programs for the community, to get money and share it, to give gifts and run courses. Because in the kingdom of God building community matters, gathering the lost and the hurting matters. We started to live for the Kingdom in the midst of the world instead of waiting for a great intervention. Our eschatology finally made sense.

The result: a lived hope, a bigger loyalty, a commitment to life, community and the world with one eye on the future. Like being part of SYCB but living in Avoca or Gembrook or Warragul. Participating in intelligent, full-bodied worship like we have here should enhance local life not detract from it, because it is always encouraging us to live our prayers and pray our lives; to live the eucharist, to be sent out with the commitment to embody the church covenant. Where we live.