

REIGN OF CHRIST | NOVEMBER 26, 2023

EZEKIEL 34:11-16, 20-24 | PSALM 95:1-7A | EPHESIANS 1:15-23 | MATTHEW 25:31-46

If you read the news twenty-four years ago this week, you got the distinct impression that the world was about to end. Or, at the very least, something bad was about to happen. The problem was what came to be known as Y2K. It was a sort of computer problem that was going to wipe out power grids, financial markets, and high scores on Minesweeper.

The problem was basically this. When these computer programs were built, engineers would input a year as its last two digits. 1995 would become 95, 1996 would be 96, and so on. When December 31, 1999 became January 1, 2000, the computers would all read “00.” The problem was that some computers would think it was 1900. Others would think it was 2000. The result would be chaos.

In the months leading up to the new year, there was rampant speculation about what could happen. But as most of us remember, what really did happen was... not much. I think there was an NFL game where they couldn't get some statistics and an ATM that crashed. But that's about it.

These days, Y2K is mostly a fun “remember when” topic. But it revealed something interesting in the way that we think about time. For one, we assume that time doesn't have gaps in it. On New Year's Eve, we go right from 1999 to 2000. There's no transition period in between. And—this is the idea we'll come back to—times can't overlap. It can't be 1900 and 2000 at the same time, hence the Y2K panic.

Around the time of Jesus, some Jews had a rather different way of thinking about time. They thought of time in terms of ages, these sort of overarching meta-structures.¹ And they were defined by who was “in charge” so to speak. To begin with, there was what they would call the “present age.” In the present age, life exists in relationship with God. But it's gone awry. It's gone off course, and it doesn't reflect the life that God intended for us to enjoy. Life contains beauty, love, and laughter. But it also contains sin, suffering, and death. There would also be an “age to come.” That was off in the future. And at that time, the God of Israel would decisively act to restore the people, bring peace to the earth, and renew creation to its full potential.

The authors of the New Testament adopt some of this framework. They say that in the resurrection of Jesus, God has acted decisively. And God's promised future, this new coming age of reconciliation and redemption, has arrived. It's here. But, of course, the “present age” hasn't ended yet. Even after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the world is still full of death and misery and suffering. Apparently, we're still in the present age.

So which is it? Are we in the present age? Or are we in the age to come? The New Testament authors—St. Paul in particular—say that the answer is both. That after the resurrection of Jesus, these two ages are now overlapping. They're happening at the same time. This idea sounds weird, but once you understand it, it helps make sense of a lot of the writing in the New Testament.

Today's reading from Ephesians is a good example of this. The ending is what we want to focus on. We're just going to do this verse by verse to draw out this idea. The author writes, “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.”

“All rule and authority and power” refers to the figures of the present age that have dominion, the institutions who are in charge, the systems that “reign” for lack of a better word. For the people who were reading this letter in Ephesus two thousand years ago, it would mean the Roman Empire, coercive uses of

¹ N.T. Wright's *Paul for Everyone* series has a good summary of this in the index.

violence, extractive economic practices, oppressive political systems, on and on. All these powers and structures claim to have the ultimate authority and the final say. But in Jesus's resurrection, God puts them all under Jesus's feet. They looked really impressive. They looked really intimidating. They looked really powerful. But it was all smoke and mirrors. They turn out to be bankrupt.

Then the writer goes on. God "put this power to work in Christ... not only in this age but also in the age to come." This is the same thing we talked about earlier. The power of the resurrection breaks from God's future into our present. Jesus holds these two ages together. One of the hymns we're singing today calls Jesus the "potentate of time," which is getting at the same idea. Jesus is not constrained by time.

And, since that power is manifested in this age, the author goes on, God "made [Christ] the head over all things for the church." In this context, to be the head means to be the source of life. Think of it less like a head on a body but more like the headwaters on a river. Everything we do originates in him. Christ, who is above all things, gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the age to come, that animates our common life. So when we are baptized and grafted into the body of Christ, we live in both ages at once.

This reframes the way we think about how we live and serve as Christ's church. It can be very easy for us—us meaning mainline Protestants—to think of church as just a present age institution. We were founded in 1955. We run these programs. We have these events. We have this charismatic leader, or we need to find a new charismatic leader. Sometimes we talk about church as if it was just a non-profit with the sacraments stapled to the side.

But the author of Ephesians reminds us that we're also something more. We are a communion enlivened by Christ, a fellowship that serves in the Spirit of the age to come. So as we live and love and serve God's world, we are not just being nice or helping people out. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.) We are also living in and participating in God's age to come. And so the ways we are formed into the body of Christ in this assembly—a washing where all are welcomed, a meal where all are fed, a sending to all in need—shape our participation in God's new creation.

What does it look like to participate in that new creation? We heard it in today's gospel reading. Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Care for the sick. Visit the incarcerated.

What do you notice about those actions? What I notice about them is that they're the kinds of things we can actually do. To be honest, they are the kinds of actions that we often say "just" in front of. *Just feeding the hungry. Just welcoming the stranger. Just caring for the sick. Nothing to see here.* St. Matthew reminds us that the ways that we participate in the life of the age to come are not just by coming up with some incredibly complicated off-the-wall program that will win us a Nobel Peace Prize. It's often by simple acts of service begun and completed in Christ's love. And because these acts originate in Christ's love, they become a part of God's new creation.

We are present-age people. Our institutions can be laden with problems. Our cultures draw us away from love of God and neighbor. As individuals, we can be resentful and cynical. But, when the Holy Spirit empowers us to serve compassionately and boldly, we are living in the age to come. We are enlivened as Jesus's body. And we are joining in the reign of Christ.

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