

Even So, Lord Jesus Come

III. "Caught By Surprise"

Matthew 24: 27-44



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We're closing in on Christmas. Next Sunday evening at 6:00, we will celebrate that Christ is come. More than 2,000 years ago, God's love became flesh in Jesus, an event about which most of the world was unaware, a life-changing event for the world. Some day in an unknown future, Christ will return and usher in his kingdom in a whole new dimension. And this time, every eye will see it...everyone will be aware. The thing that is common to both those comings of Christ is that we can't do anything about them but remember one and anticipate the other. That's why there's so much nostalgia around the first coming and so much speculation around the second. But in the power of the Holy Spirit the coming of Christ is not just a past or future event. It is a current reality. And that is a coming of Christ we can do something about.

"What does that have to do with Christmas?" you ask. If we are open to the Christ who has come, then Christmas is a reminder of the reality of God's love. If we are open to the Christ who is to return on some great and glorious day, then Christmas reminds us that life has direction and God is at work. But if we are open to Christ coming to us in this moment then we can literally go beyond remembering and anticipating to experiencing Christmas. For me, that is what it means to "have Christmas." If I say to you "Have a Great Christmas," I'm speaking of that something extra and that something more. Seeing family members, sharing meals, singing Christmas music, and exchanging gifts are important, but "having Christmas" is about having a renewed relationship with God, in which, in the words of the hymn, "Christ is born in us today" – a life-changing event.

We have been looking at these strange words from Jesus in Matthew 24 for Advent, and the theme word for today is "surprise." Both the first coming and the second coming are biblical surprises. People could and will be able to look back and see that there were signs of Christ coming all around them, but they couldn't see the signs at the time. God does have a way of surprising us in Jesus. We'll restrict ourselves to just the Christmas surprises for a moment. He shows up in different places than we expect (in an obscure village not a huge city, in an open-ended barn not a palace). He shows up to different people than we expect ("no count" shepherds, and eccentric astrologers). God still does that. I will find Christ meeting me in new ways at ball games, car repair shops, shopping centers, and doctor's offices. I will find Christ speaking to me through people who don't go to church as well as those who do. And when I experience God especially present in a given moment, I am always overwhelmed and surprised. In our family, surprises are part of the folklore of who we are. We wish we could do more of them. Evidently, God likes them, too. His greatest surprise is Jesus, in the past in Bethlehem, in the future on clouds of glory, and in those mini-surprises all through our lives.

According to our scripture lesson, Jesus' coming is not just surprising, it is both "good news" for some and "bad news" for others. It's interesting when Paul talks about Jesus coming again in I Thessalonians 4, it's about "the dead in Christ" rising first and then those who are alive joining those who had been dead in the air. It's triumphant and all good news. But in these words of Jesus, the first response of the nations of the world is not rejoicing but mourning. In the old Negro Spiritual, "My Lord, What a Morning," there are two traditions. One spells morning with the sense of the dawn. The other spells mourning, with the sense

of grief. One verse sings, “And you’ll hear the sinner moan” with the nations underground. Looking to my God’s right hand, when the stars begin to fall.” Jesus is using the images of judgment, reflections of the Old Testament prophets who looked with dread upon “the day of the Lord.” Jesus doesn’t just come to be our savior. He also comes to be our judge. Putting our faith in Christ solves the difference of heaven and hell, but we are still responsible for the difference we have made in the lives around us. And when he comes there is great mourning. For the game is over. No more chances to reconcile and forgive, no more chances to love and encourage. So the nations, and the individuals in them, respond with great regret and remorse.

So we have the surprise of his coming and that Christ’s coming has in it both good news and bad news, victory and judgment. But the bible, while giving us different pictures of Christ’s coming, is clear on the certainty of his coming. In that way, the second coming is like the resurrection of Jesus. The four gospels are dramatically different in the way they describe Easter, but together, they show 1) they didn’t just get together and decide what the facts would be (collusion), and 2) their varying perspectives and details show that from different angles something did indeed happen. The second coming is like that. You can’t line the second coming descriptions up and make them all agree. But you know something is going to happen. That is why we have, even after nearly 2,000 years of waiting, still look for the second coming Christ. We say with confidence in each communion service, “Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.”

If Jesus’ coming is a surprise and it’s both good news and bad news, and if his coming is certain, then it stands to reason we should always be ready for it. In the past couple of weeks I have had some fun with and even been somewhat critical of the “Left Behind” series. But this teaching of Jesus is where the whole concept comes from. One in the field is taken and one is left behind. One woman preparing for a meal is taken and the other is left behind. You have seen the bumper sticker that says, “In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned.” In the spirit of this scripture lesson, I say, “Pray it doesn’t happen in rush hour!” My argument has never been that Christ wasn’t coming again. It has been with those who have timed it before tribulation or even have timed it on specific dates, decades or lifetimes. In our scripture lesson, Jesus emphasizes again that no one knows when Christ will return. But he is coming, and as one professor said in a class to us, “One thing for sure. It’s sooner now than it was back then.”

It is this idea of being ready for Christ’s coming that is key in Matthew’s version, as compared to Mark and Luke. He even follows up this passage with three parables – the parable of the fig tree, the parable of the talents and the parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

One of the stresses of being a pastor is that your lives are always on parade. That is a particular stressor for Tina when it comes to keeping the house picked up. She lives in perpetual fear that congregational members will show up unannounced and find the house in chaotic disorder. And she has three males and a dog who have the “gift” of disorder. It’s not that she wants long-term notice for you to come by. Quite the opposite, she would like for people to be able to come by and not find the house a wreck. I know that some of you have the same fear about having the pastor just “drop in.”

But the question remains, “Why make the effort of getting ready for Christ to come, when he may not even come in our lifetimes?” And the answer is this, “In getting ready for his ultimate coming, it prepares us for him to experience his coming to us in the now.” Not all of God’s surprise comings happen in the future. Let me share with you from an experience of my sister, Lisa, from the Poconos of Eastern Pennsylvania.

I was shopping alone at the Giant (a supermarket). I was hurting inside and needed to be alone. During the 2-3 weeks prior, my husband had been hospitalized and diagnosed with panic/anxiety disorder, something I had seen sporadically over the past 17 years. Here I was, and as much as I

loved him, I could not fix him. My son had been passing out on the football field with no explanation or solution offered by a very slow to respond health care network.

To say I was overwhelmed was an understatement.

I noticed a young girl at the store in a wheelchair with her mother (you couldn't tell how old she was), reading from a hand-written grocery list of items her mother needed to get. While standing in the checkout line, I turned to see the girl and her mother right behind me. As it became my turn, I turned to see the girl slowly get up from her wheelchair and tell the cashier, "I'll bag her groceries." I politely thanked her and said it wasn't necessary, but she said, "No, I want to." She began bagging and said "You know, I'm gonna have a job some day." The cashier and I told her "Don't rush it, there'll be plenty of time for work...just enjoy your life." As she bagged items, she described some of the products I had purchased in detail, mostly by taste and how good they were right down to the root beer and how it made her tongue tingle. She looked at me and said, "You know, I had brain cancer when I was 8 years old. I'm almost 15 now and am ready to celebrate another anniversary of being cancer-free. I had my surgery at Johns Hopkins Medical Center." I told her, "Well, we are so glad you're here and I really appreciate you helping me." She then said again, "You know, I'm going to have a job someday," as if she'd said it to me for the first time and asked our names. She told us her name was Samantha.

She finished bagging. I thanked her again and told her to have a good day. She returned the comment saying, "You have a great day, too." Then, when she handed me the last bag, she touched my hand, looked into my eyes and said, "No, I mean it...you have a GREAT day." I did all I could not to hug her, for fear I might frighten her. I sat in my car for the next 15 minutes or so sobbing and taking in the enormity of what had just happened to me, knowing full well that God placed Samantha there in that place in that moment...for me. Samantha may never have a job or have what we consider a "normal life," and will certainly always struggle. And sadly, she will never know what an amazing gift she gave me that day, unsolicited, unwrapped, a simple but profound act of charity.

I know how busy Lisa gets. She really didn't have time for all that. But her brokenness had made her ready. And through a girl named Samantha, Christ came. For Lisa, it was a wonderful, life-changing surprise. What has made you ready? And what surprise might the coming Christ have for you?

I close this sermon with a song by Bill Gaither, entitled appropriately, "Even So Lord Jesus, Come."