

Even So, Lord Jesus Come II. "Here is Jesus - Not!"

Matthew 24: 15-26



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

Those who were here last week will remember that I mentioned that we live in a generation that has experienced a revival of teaching and emphasis on the second coming. The emphasis started in the late 1960s and continued into the 80s. It still dominates in some denominations and in televangelism. But the comment of a friend in my sophomore year in college (in the spring of 1977) still stays with me. He said, "I believe Jesus is coming again very soon and there is no need for me to spend the time or money on getting a degree. I am quitting school." In hindsight, my friend could not have been more foolish. My friend had allowed his belief in the imminent return of Christ to make him intellectually and socially lazy.

I fear that the church's emphasis on the second coming as "the great bailout" from a sinful and troubled world has not helped people like my friend. Hal Lindsey in the recorded version of his book *"The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon"* said, "Christ did not tell us to clean up the fishpond, he said to fish from it." Many Christians have been taught that they don't need to do peace work, because there will be no peace until the Prince of Peace comes. We don't need to do social work, because the Lord predicted social disasters. After all, didn't Jesus say, "The poor you will have with you always?" There are even some who teach that our attempts to better the world could be delaying the Lord's return. In Europe, our Christian brothers and sisters are demonstrating and working in research and political fields to overcome the difficulties of environmental pollution, global strife, and overpopulation. They find it as part of being responsible Christians. And they wonder why American Christians don't see it the same way.

You have heard me say repeatedly from this pulpit that I believe God is calling the Church at large and St. Luke's Lubbock in particular to raise up a new generation of Christian leaders of all ages who will follow the call of God and change the face of our world. The era of the isolated church is now ending, and a new era of evangelical social activism is beginning. That is a huge, expensive and risky task. If the great bailout happens, we will have wasted our efforts. But if the great bailout doesn't happen, and we do not raise up a new generation of Christian leaders for the church and for the world, we will have been unfaithful. We have been worrying about being "left behind" and have left behind our neighbor when he or she needed us most, when he or she needed "love to become flesh" (one of the key themes of Advent).

One of the most exciting developments in the church has been the emergence of churches like Saddleback Community Church under the leadership of Rick Warren taking a front-line role in the fight against AIDS in Africa. We are doing the same in the United Methodist Church. Recently, the council of Bishops met in Mozambique in sub-Saharan Africa. In that country of 20,000,000 people, 1 in 10 are suffering with HIV/AIDS. That is a lower percentage than in many places where our United Methodist missionaries serve. Some interior countries have no adult leadership at all. We have already taken an offering at the Southwest Campus for the global AIDS crisis and we will do the same at this campus on Christmas Eve.

Last week's main sign of the coming Christ was the destruction of the temple. The second sign is related to it, what the Bible calls "the abomination of desolation." The phrase actually comes from the book of

Daniel in chapters 9, 11 and 12, and it refers to the desecration of the altar of the temple in Jerusalem by sacrificing something unclean or to another god. Many churches hook together the Daniel passages, this passage from Matthew and similar material in the book of Revelation and predict that “the abomination of desolation” is yet to happen. That may be true, but the abomination of desolation in the temple has already happened at least three times. The first time happened shortly after the writing of Daniel in which the Roman ruler Antiochus Epiphanies (in 168 BC) put a statue of Zeus in the Jewish temple, and then sacrificed a pig on the altar. In 38 AD, just nine years after the death of Christ, Caligula attempted to put a statue of himself on the altar. After all, Caligula claimed the title that began with Caesar Augustus, “king of kings and lord of lords.” Then with the arrival of general Titus and the sacking of the temple in 70 AD, the Roman seal was placed in the destroyed temple, the chief of insults. The abomination of desolation had happened again. One of my great fears is that this generation could have its own “abomination of desolation” at the hands of desperate and angry insurgents.

The next theme is one that was also hinted at in earlier verses, that there were people who would claim to be the Messiah and deceive the people. The truth is that there were not many people who claimed to be the Messiah. More claimed the role that Christ was acting uniquely and more dramatically in them, that God’s Spirit was on them more than in other people. They would do miracles and gather large followings of them as God’s prophet for their times. When the Romans went on the rampage in 70 AD, estimates are that more than 1,100,000 Jews died. In one instance, there was a special messenger from God who told the people the Messiah was coming and they were to all gather in the temple to meet him. More than 6,000 people did so, making them sitting ducks for the Romans. All of them were killed. David Koresh, Jim Jones, and Heaven’s Gate are just some examples of others who have done the same in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. We have people like former Presbyterian minister Sung Yung Moon making claims to be the messenger who is sent to complete the work of Jesus. There are always plenty of needy and gullible people willing to follow.

As the church, we must prepare our people for there will always be captivating personalities who will have followings and there have been miracles done even in the name of Satan. Many people who have been duped into following false Messiahs and super Christians are church people who only got enough religion to make them a target. Parents, I urge you to take the time to teach the children the faith. An hour or two a week at church won’t get it done. I am so thankful for the early Sunday School teachers who taught me the Old Testament stories of Jacob and Esau, Moses, David and Esther. I learned about Jesus and his parables. What I wasn’t taught so well was how to invite Jesus into my life as the very center of who I was. In this day and time, we must teach our children and one another both the stories of the Old Testament and the stories of Jesus and invite people into a dynamic relationship with God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. If all we get is a good dose of religion and morality, we will be easy targets for that which is false and misleading.

There is yet a third theme in this passage which I need to mention. The destruction of the temple and the abomination of desolation were to launch the beginning of “the great tribulation.” Again, Daniel, Jesus and John in the book of Revelation all talk about this. And like the abomination of desolation, these times of great tribulation may have been fulfilled multiple times. But the trend is clear. In the midst of the tribulation, Christ comes, not before it. This is my quarrel with the *Left Behind* series and others who promote the idea that Christ will come again and spare us from going through “the great tribulation.” There have been many who have come to Christ through those books and many have been stirred to fresh faith, for which I am thankful. I know that there are passages of scripture that can be used to support a pre-tribulation coming of Christ, but that is not the message of the Bible overall. Jesus does not say that in Matthew 24 at all. In fact, he prepares his hearers to go through it. In Revelation, deliverance comes in the midst of the great tribulation. In order to come up with a pre-tribulation coming of Christ in Revelation, you have to insert it (add it in) between Revelation 3 and 4, which is exactly what teachers of

that persuasion do (often with very elaborate charts).

For me this issue is huge, because a life principle is involved. Never does Jesus promise that following him provides immunity from tribulation, either from daily tribulations or from the great tribulation. As the early Church became the persecuted Church, many cried out to God that they would be spared. They saw that persecution as the prelude to the return of Christ and wondered why it didn't happen. They reluctantly learned of the Christ who comes to them in the midst of tribulation. The child in all of us wants to be tribulation exempt, Amen? And we question our faith and the reality of God when tribulation comes. We wish it were different. And in heaven it will be. But Jesus says, "In the world you will have tribulation, but I have overcome the world." Did Christ prevent the storms from coming on the Sea of Galilee? No, he came to those 'scared to death' disciples in the midst of the storms. He is the master in the storm. Just as we dare not let our belief in an imminent second coming make us lazy or socially irresponsible, we dare not let that belief make us soft and weak, either as individual Christians or as the church. For in both cases, we are to be tribulation-seasoned.

Tonight in our "Carols and Candles" celebration, I want you to be listening for a special moment. There is a song the choir will sing in which there is an echo of a three word phrase, "Jesus is coming." Sometimes it is quiet, at barely a whisper. Sometimes it is loud and raucous. The only thing I would have done with that song is put dissonance and ugliness around it. For the picture from God's Word is of the coming Christ in the midst of temple collapse, of sacrileges and desolations, of false Messiahs and misleading Christians and overwhelming difficulties. In our own day, churches and church leaders may collapse, the things we hold dear will be desecrated and destroyed, but still Jesus is coming. In our own day, false Messiahs and ideologies will even have celebrity followings and challenges that threaten our very existence will threaten, but still Jesus is coming. We remember his coming 2000 years ago. We look forward to his coming on the clouds of glory. We reach out to him as he comes in this very moment. Jesus is coming! Jesus is coming! Even so Lord Jesus, come!