

Even So, Lord Jesus Come

I. "What Are We Waiting For?"

Matthew 24: 1-14



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

In the church newsletter, I wrote an article about playing the ghost of Jacob Marley in the musical *Scrooge*, based on Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Marley was the first of three ghosts who appeared in a dream - the ghost of Christmas past. There would be a ghost of Christmas present and Christmas future. Together, they gave the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge the opportunity to reflect on his life and change from who he had been and how he had treated people. The season of Advent gives us the same opportunity. For many, if not most people, Advent is about looking back 2,000 years and celebrating that God's love became flesh in a baby in Bethlehem. That's the emphasis I have generally used, alternating each year between the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke. But last December, Max Caraway reminded me that

Advent is supposed to be the time when we anticipate the second coming of Christ, his triumphant return and the establishing of his kingdom as the rule on earth. He is right. Suggested scriptures for preaching for this time of year are almost always on that subject. We will be doing that emphasis this year. The question, whether we tend to remember the historic first coming or anticipate the future second coming, is "How have we allowed the message of Advent to change how we live right now?"

There are two extremes among church folk at Advent that can cause this season to be more empty than full, more busy than sacred. For some, remembering the first coming is about singing carols and passing candlelight (sharing in a wonderful and sacred tradition), a participation in advent nostalgia. For others, anticipating the second coming is about being delivered from the world's difficulties and our own personal struggles (about deciding whether you will be "left behind" or not), a participation in advent escapism. Advent past and advent future are meant to encourage a different you and me in this Advent, a participation in Advent experience. Advent nostalgia, advent escapism, or advent experience, which will it be?

So, here we go, looking during this Advent at what scholars have called the 'little apocalypse' (in contrast with the Revelation, "the big apocalypse"). It is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Some of it, you may not have heard before. The material is hard-edged, with an "in your face style." But these are the words of Jesus and worthy of our careful hearing.

The disciples ask Jesus, "What will the signs of your coming be?" We would expect Jesus to lay out a whole series of developments that would show that the kingdom is about to arrive: an increase of disciples around the world, angels announcing the event at least to those he has chosen. But instead he gives negatives that would seem to signal the kingdom isn't coming. The first sign would be the destruction of the temple. You may remember that in the trial of Jesus before Jewish leaders, false witnesses accused Jesus of plotting to destroy the temple.

Herod's Temple was one of the greatest sights of the ancient world. The stones were of the whitest marble, blocks measuring 25 feet in length, 18 feet in height and 12 feet in thickness. The Temple rose some five stories from its foundation and 8 stories above the city below. Of the temple Josephus writes: "Being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so

fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.”

The truth is that just after the writing of two of the gospels (Matthew and Mark) and before the writing of the other two (Luke and John), this prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled. Under the leadership of Roman emperor Titus, the army sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, even splitting the stones to get the gold out of them. The temple in Jerusalem was one of the signs to the people that no matter what, God was with them.

We do like our sanctuaries. They usually are open with high ceilings calling forth our worship to God. They are beautiful, often twice the price per square foot of the rest of our buildings. We even teach our children that this is “God’s house.” We have seen in our day and time that mosques, churches and temples are no longer safe from vandalism, terrorism or military campaigns. So how do we continue, when the holy places are no longer treated as sacred? How do we continue when we no longer have organized prayer in schools or are able to display the symbols of our faith in public places?

One of the things the children of Israel learned from their time in exile (where there were no temples) was that God could dwell with them even if the holy places and the special feasts and holidays weren’t there. God is not location, institution or calendar-bound. Paul would say to people that even their bodies were temples of God. And the truth is there is nothing necessarily holy about plaster, wood, bricks and stained-glass windows. With Moses, there was nothing holy about desert mosque until God visited it. What makes these places, these temples and sanctuaries holy is that it is where we make space for God and wherever room is made for him, the space becomes holy. My guess is that you will be “in church” a lot over the next few weeks. In order for you to experience Advent, you will need to make some more space for God – maybe with your time, maybe in your thinking and maybe in your heart. The greatest temples are the ones we cannot see and the one God may treasure is the one you make for him that no one else knows about – especially if you are looking for Advent experience.

Right after Jesus predicted the fall of the temple, then the disciples (Peter, Andrew, James and John, according to Mark) took Jesus aside and ask, “When will you come back and the end come?” Every New Testament writer sincerely believed that Jesus was coming back during their lifetime. In fact, one of the difficulties for the latest writers was that Jesus hadn’t come back already. You and I live in a generation where there has been renewed emphasis on the second coming. Hal Lindsey wrote *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1971. His second book in 1979 was entitled *The Terminal Generation*. In an interview, Lindsey said he thought Christ would come back again no later than 1981. Pat Robertson predicted the lineup of the planets in 1989 would likely trigger the second coming. Those deadlines have come and gone and we’re still here. In fact, the only people who were raptured seemed to be Jimmy Hoffa and the people who disappear in the Bermuda Triangle. Of course what that would mean is that even Tim LaHaye was “left behind.” Yes, I’m being flippant, but the question does beg an answer. My father-in-law was absolutely convinced that Christ would return in his lifetime. He went to be with the Lord eight years ago. Oral Roberts has said the same thing and he is now 91 years young. Every generation since these words of Jesus has thought it was the last.

Our scripture lesson points that some of the wars and rumors and wars, increased storms and earthquakes were also signs of the end. But those have happened in waves throughout history. There is a part of me that wishes that Christ would come again soon and deliver us from the quagmire in Iraq, the famines and war in Dafur, nuclear threats from desperate and rogue nations, and the results of overpopulation, world pollution and global warming. But a look back over the centuries says, “Don’t bank on it.”

The third sign of the return of Christ and the end of the world as it is involved the persecution of people for their faith. We have been so privileged in this regard. As Christians, we can worship as we please, do business and not be penalized, etc. But the truth is the twenty-first century is the generation when more people have experienced religious persecution than any other. And because Christians are the largest of the religions, they also have the largest number of persecutions. The disciples of Jesus would learn that the hard way. And most of them were martyred for the faith. But notice the hidden blessing in the midst of persecution. Jesus said of his own persecution and death,

“Unless a seed goes into the ground and dies, it cannot bear much fruit.”

The persecution of God’s people continues to be the multiplier and cultivator. The very thing opponents use to discourage faith and witness becomes the fuel of it. Jesus says that the end will not come until the whole world has heard the message. Many have mentioned that television and the internet have made that amazingly possible. Yet, looking back says that we dare not post a date. We must still be willing to pay the price and be part of the planting of the gospel in ever new places.

So, if we cannot avoid the destruction of the sacred, or predict when Christ will come again, and we can’t avoid persecution, what can we do as we wait for the coming Christ? For me, the secret comes in remembering that the kingdom of God is yet to come and the kingdom of God is already here. Jesus is coming again in glory, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is already here. And whether Christ comes in glory in the next moment or in the next millennium, the task is the same. We follow Christ and we keep spreading the Word and the more we do, we experience more and more the power, the joy, and the grace of the coming Christ. But maybe another way to get at living in this gap between the first and second comings of Christ is to ask a different question. If you knew Christ were coming again in the next 24 hours, what would you do? Would you clean up your act morally? Would you pray more? Would you make peace with someone you hated? Would you tell somebody about God’s love that you have been putting off telling? Wouldn’t we be surprised if in doing those things Christ did come to our lives in new and powerful ways. Yes, that would be Advent experience.