

Coming to the Manger to Find Hope

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

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Someone reportedly asked the pope what he would say to the church today if he knew that the Second Coming of Christ would occur tomorrow.

With a wry smile and a twinkle in his eyes, the pope answered, “Look busy!”

My sense is that most people today don't quite know what to do with the Bible's teachings about the Second Coming of Jesus. I hear some who claim to believe it literally, that one day soon, very soon, they say, we will hear the blast of a trumpet, the heavens will open, and Jesus will descend on a cloud of glory to end human history as we know it. Yet, these very people are funding their retirement plans as if they are expecting to be here for a while.

And then I hear others who argue that this is just ancient mythology and should be ignored. Over 2,000 years have passed, they say. The Second Coming of Christ certainly cannot be considered “imminent.” Therefore, why believe it at all? It's mere wishful thinking. Wake up, they say, and face reality.

Somewhere between these two extremes there is a loud silence from those of us whose minds will not allow us to think so literally but whose hearts will not allow us to discount this teaching entirely. What are we to believe about the Second Coming of Jesus?

This question opens Advent this year. As we prepare to celebrate Christ's first coming, his advent, we also look toward and prepare for his second advent, his Second Coming. And we just might do a better job of it, if we knew what to look and prepare for.

This text from Luke 21 can be used to scare people onto the straight and narrow, at least for a while. Many of you, like me, grew up hearing sermons about the one “left behind.” In fact, a series of books about a

decade ago by that title tapped into our theological insecurity about this issue and made two men very wealthy. A woman commended the books to me once, saying with a chuckle, “Be prepared to be scared.” Jesus never said that. Near the end of his life, Jesus talked with his disciples about his Second Coming. He told them, first, that no one but God knows when “that day” will occur. The angels in heaven don’t know. Jesus himself didn’t even know. Only the Father knows—and maybe a few Baptist evangelists in Calhoun Country! At least, they seemed to know.

Then, second, he said that it will be sudden. And, yes, he does speak of two people working together in a field. On that day, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be working at a grinding mill; one will be taken and the other left. But Jesus doesn’t say that that is something to fear. In fact, his message consistently was just the opposite: “Be not afraid.” This is what Jesus told his disciples, “Be on guard.” “Be alert” and pray. In other words, be prepared.

In Matthew’s account of this same teaching, Jesus used a home robbery to illustrate his point. If your home has ever been robbed, you know what an awful sense of violation you feel. We lived in a pastorium years ago, way out in the country, and we were robbed twice. The second time was on Christmas morning. Kelly was working at a hospital at that time, and Challice and I went to visit with her. When we returned home, we discovered that someone broke in and stolen all the Christmas presents. Needless to say, we were not prepared and made some changes to the pastorium. Jesus said that if a homeowner knows that a thief is coming on a particular night at a particular time, the homeowner can make precautions on that particular night and prevent the robbery. But a robber never calls and tells you he’s coming, right? The robber comes when you’re not on guard, so the homeowner must always be alert. Jesus is not telling his disciples be scared; he is telling them to be on guard, to be prepared. Now the important question for us is, “What exactly does that mean for us?”

Reinhold Neibuhr has been called the greatest theologian ever to touch American soil. That’s quite a tall claim. No doubt he and his brother, Richard, were both great theologians. This is what Reinhold Neibuhr says about the Second Coming of Christ. He says that Christians should *live* as though Christ might return within the day, before this day ends. And he says that we should *plan* as though he might not return within our lifetime. Live as though he will return before this very day ends, but plan as though he will

not return within our lifetime. Now, I think that is a pretty good way for us to live with this teaching about the Second Coming of Christ. Live as though he will return before this day is over, but make plans as though he will not return during our lifetime.

So it begs the question: what would you do differently if you knew that the return of Jesus was at sundown today, that God's kingdom would come in its fullness and life as we know it would end? Some of you would be asking to be baptized today, right? Some would want to spend some time on their knees this afternoon, possibly shedding a few tears. Some might spend the day asking forgiveness from people you have wronged. Others might spend the day in the arms of someone you love. You might walk through your garden one more time, feeling the crunch of fall leaves and taking in the beauty of the camellia blooms. If you really believed that life would end today at sundown, what would you do?

Then do it. Do it today. That's what Jesus is teaching here. Seize this day to do what matters most in your life.

Have you read about the Belgian man who was thought to be in a coma for 23 years? He had a near-fatal car wreck that left him in a vegetative state, but he wasn't actually in a coma. He was paralyzed and could hear everything going on around him, but he couldn't communicate. With the aid of modern medical equipment, physicians were able to determine that his brain was fully functional. He is now able to communicate with a computer. This is what he says: "At some moments it was terribly lonely but I knew my family was believing in me." The he added, "I simply want to enjoy life. I notice a big difference now I'm back in contact with the world."

Imagine a chance to re-enter life after 23 years, to reconnect with loved ones, to engage the world. Today's text is a call to do just that. It doesn't mean that you can't eat and drink and play and enjoy life. It means that we should eat and drink and play and enjoy life. And pray and hold hands and listen and sing. We must be on guard to tend what matters most. We must tend those matters, and then we are prepared.

Live as though Christ might return before the day is over, but *plan as though he might not return in your lifetime*. It would be irresponsible of us to withdraw from life, as some have done through the years, and simply wait

for the return of Jesus. I see nothing in the teachings of Jesus that encourages us to withdraw from life and wait. To the contrary, Jesus encouraged his followers to engage the world, to care about people, to make a difference. In fact, he told them to go into all the world, remember? Preach the good news. Baptize. Start new churches. Don't just look busy; be busy! It is our responsibility as followers of Jesus to work at feeding the hungry, building affordable housing, struggling to end wars and wipe out diseases. We must be actively engaged in eliminating racism, sexism, stereotypes and hatred. We must be busy doing the work of the Kingdom of God because Christ might not return in our lifetime.

I had a good laugh recently. Someone sent me some letters to God written by children. I'm not going to read all of them, but a few were precious. A little girl named Joyce wrote, "Dear God, thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy."

A little girl named Norma (do I see a theme here?) asked a question, "Dear God, did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?"

This was my favorite. From Nan, "Dear God, I bet it is hard for you to love all of everybody in the world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it."

But that is our job, isn't it? To love those four who are near and dear. To hug them, cherish them because Christ may return before the sun sets this very day. And then to love all of everybody in the world with acts of mercy and justice because Christ may not return in our lifetime.

It's Advent Sunday, which means that this is the first day of the year in the Christian calendar. Today is our New Year's Day, a day to start over, a day to begin new things, a day to plan what you're going to do for Christ. Hear the word of our Lord, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down.... Be alert at all times, praying...."

That is the hope we find by coming to the manger.

Closing Prayer

Lord, remind us, as you did your disciples long ago, of what is most important. Amen.