

“With the End in Sight”

This is the second Sunday of Advent, the season in the church where we prepare for Christmas and the birth of Jesus – the “advent” or “coming” of God in human flesh. Advent is also a time when we focus on Christ *coming again* in power and glory at the end of time.

To be realistic, whenever I preach on the return of Christ, I realize that this does not exactly thrill people. True, *some* Christians are really into end times stuff. They read books on prophecy, and watch TV preachers who focus on this. They point to events in the Holy Land and say how these happenings are fulfilling prophecies of things that are to take place prior to Jesus’ return. But many Christian believers give little thought to Christ’s return. Somehow this just doesn’t seem to be relevant to the stuff we deal with in everyday living. But Jesus talked about His return in glory, and said we ought to be prepared for it. This will signal the end of history as we know it. It will be a time of judgment, when the righteous are separated from the wicked, the saved separated from the lost.

Christians in the *first century* were very mindful of Christ’s return. In fact, they expected Him to return before they died. They thought He would return almost immediately. But He didn’t. And as the days and months turned to years, some of them began to doubt that He’d come back at all. False teachers infiltrated the church and scoffed at the idea of Christ’s return. The letter of 2nd Peter in the New Testament talks about them. "First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'" (2 Peter 3:3-4).

These skeptics ridiculed the idea that Jesus would come back. There are people today who scoff at the teaching of Jesus’ return. Go to any secular college or university and you will find plenty of people who laugh at what the Bible says about the end of time – including Christ’s return. But there are even *Christians* who belittle the idea that Christ will literally come back. John MacArthur, a noted Christian apologist, reminds us that some of the big names in theology in the last century did not believe in the actual physical return of Christ.

Notice, 2 Peter says scoffers come “indulging in their own lusts” (2 Peter 3:4). If you’re living a self-indulgent life, you probably don’t want to hear about Jesus returning and a time of judgment taking place! Sometimes we ridicule or dismiss things in the Bible because if we believed them it would mean we have to change the way we live.

The argument the scoffers used was this: Everything’s the same as it always has been since the beginning of time. Seasons come like clockwork. The tide comes in, the tide goes out, nothing changes. There are Christians today who don’t have any sense of urgency about the return of Christ because everything seems to be pretty much the same as it always been.

But Peter says, “Remember Noah and the flood.” These scoffers forget that God brought judgment against the world before – with the great flood in Noah’s day. Something like that, he says, is ahead of us! "But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless" (2 Peter 3:7).

He says more about this: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be destroyed with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed...waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and destroyed and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter 3:10, 12-13).

Term: "day of the Lord" (found in verse 10) was a Jewish concept. The Jews spoke of 2 ages: the present age, which is evil, and the age to come, the golden age of God, when God rules completely, and the wicked and the enemies of God are overcome. The transition period from the present evil age to the new age is called "The Day of the Lord", and it is marked by cataclysmic events...upheavals in nature. For instance, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will be turned to blood.

In the Scripture from second Peter chapter 3 it describes fire, and how the elements of the earth will be dissolved by fire. God brought judgment on a sinful world in Noah's time through *water*, the Flood. God will bring judgment on the world in the future, not through water, but by *fire*. There's an old spiritual that slaves sang in the fields that picked up on this theme. The song includes the line, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign; no more water, the fire next time"

Does this mean our present world will *literally* be destroyed by *fire*? Some have suggested that this could refer to all-out nuclear exchange. For some years after the Cold War between Russia and the United States we haven't been thinking much about the threat of nuclear warfare. However, with Putin's veiled threats, and with North Korea testing long range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads that reach the U.S., we are once again having those worries.

Other Christians and Bible scholars say the "fire" mentioned here is not literal but *figurative*. The imagery of fire is often used in the Bible to describe the presence of God, or the holiness of God, or the wrath of God. This imagery of fire suggests that God will intervene and be very much present when this world gives way to God's new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. Whether we believe in the literal destruction of the world by fire, or see this as a symbolic way to describe God's holy presence bringing history to fulfillment, the point is that God is in control of human history. God will orchestrate the end of this present world.

Scientists have theories about how the world began and how it will end. For example, a Swiss scientist by the name of Dr. Benjamin Allamach of the European laboratory for particle physics, has said the universe may be in a state where matter could disintegrate at any moment. He said current information implies that the universe is perched in an unstable vacuum and "could suddenly condense into 'jelly' and cause this catastrophe." Doesn't that make your day! I guess it *would be* a mild catastrophe if the universe would condense into jelly! But, he says, the probability is less than that of buying two lottery tickets in the same week and winning with both of them! Whew! Had us worried there for a minute, huh!

I can still recall sitting in my 9th grade science class and hearing the teacher tell us that the sun

is a star, and like other stars, it will at some point burn out and die. That scared me! So, will the universe disintegrate into jelly, or will the star called our sun simply die, taking us along with it? However, Scriptures like we read in 2 Peter assure us that God is in control of bringing this world as we know it to a purposeful end.

Peter goes on to say that the reason Christ has not yet returned is because of God's patience and mercy. God doesn't want anyone to perish! "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (verse 9). God is holding back Christ's return to give people time to repent and turn from our sins!

And what seems to us like a long time before the return of Christ (about 2,000 years) is nothing to God! Look at verse 8: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." The time since Jesus returned to the Father and now is long in our eyes, but it's like the snap of a finger to God! Peter goes on to say that the Lord will return unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. This is a theme that Jesus mentions a number of times. His return will be at a time we don't expect Him to come.

Then our text from 2nd Peter chapter 3 becomes very practical. "Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness" (2 Peter 3:11). How should we be living as we wait for Jesus' return? It says we are to get ready *by leading lives of holiness and godliness*.

What kind of person comes to mind when you think of a "holy" person? I'm afraid that for most people this does not conjure up very positive images. We may imagine a "holy" person to be a straight-laced individual who hardly ever has a real hearty belly laugh, some super-religious person who's always talking religion and churchy stuff, or someone in plain clothes with no makeup, or a person who is critical and judgmental, always pointing out other peoples' faults.

The word "holy" in the Bible means "separate," "set apart" – someone devoted to the deity. We're "holy" when we set ourselves apart to serve God – to love God and do what pleases God. Now, yes, holiness does have moral content: if we are devoted to God and want what He wants we will strive for purity and wholesomeness in our thoughts, words, and actions. 2 Corinthians 7:1 refers to this, "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting *holiness* out of reverence for God." Also note that this kind of holiness is not something that we pull off by ourselves; it comes about through the *Holy Spirit* living and working in us!

Besides living a *holy* life, we are also to live in *godliness*. Godliness means our nature becomes more like God's nature. At the point of our conversion to Christ, we begin to put on the divine nature! What's the most prominent characteristic of God? *God is love!* Genuinely "godly" people are not harsh, judgmental, super religious people – but people who are compassionate, caring, loving human beings.

A few years back there was a column in the Lancaster newspaper on why many youth were leaving the church. A young person wrote a letter to the editor in response, saying she could identify with the point the column was making.

She wrote: "While I am certainly not an atheist, I have felt myself pushing away, and not wanting to be bothered with organized religion...the way religion is now portrayed in the church...has become such an unattainable goal that people are turned away from it.

"Everything is seen as a sin that we should be judged on. We are never good enough. The Christian community looks down at us for who we hang out with, what we wear and certain life choices we make. I feel as though we are constantly being judged and criticized. Many Christians look over the fact that Jesus was poor and spent time with prostitutes and tax collectors.

"Christianity is based around the ideal of grace, which is now rarely shown. I am turned off by the people Christianity, not the actual religion."

I felt so sad when I read this. Yes, Jesus wants us to be "godly" people, waiting for His return. But that doesn't mean we are to be joyless, judgmental, hard to be around people! Not at all! If we are "godly", we will be loving, caring, compassionate human beings, just like Jesus was!

Perhaps the bottom line is that *we're going to live differently if we conscious that Christ could return at any moment, and we have to stand before the King of kings and Lord of lords!*

One time when 20th Century Fox advertised in the New York papers to fill a vacancy in its sales force, one applicant replied: "I am at present selling furniture at the address below. You may judge my ability as a salesman if you will stop in to see me at anytime, pretending that you are interested in buying furniture. When you come in, you can identify me by my red hair. And I will have no way of identifying you. Such salesmanship as I exhibit during your visit, therefore, will be no more than my usual workday approach and not a special effort to impress a prospective employer." From among more than 1500 applicants, this guy got the job!

Jesus wants us to be ready like that for His return! Doing our best every day to honor Him.

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