

A Sermon for Advent 1, Year A
Matthew 24:36-44

A new, and better, world is coming!

Happy new year! That's right, today is the first Sunday of the new church year. The season of Advent has begun, and as we progress through the four or so weeks of this season, two things will be on the Christian's mind.

The first thing on our mind is the obvious one: We're preparing to celebrate the birthday of Jesus, on December 25th. And to that end, houses and yards are being decorated, Christmas trees are beginning to occupy prominent places in our homes and, more and more, Christmas carols are being played in shopping malls and grocery stores, not to mention radio stations and home stereos.

The other thing that's on our minds is not quite so prominent, but we're reminded of it nevertheless by the readings from scripture we hear on Sunday mornings. And what I'm speaking of is the second coming of Jesus. I'm sure we've all heard about it, but I'm equally sure few of us really understand what it will mean.

Last week, I talked about all of the biblical images that have been used to describe Jesus. If you were here, undoubtedly you can recall some of them. Jesus has been described as the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of Man, the Son of David, the Son of God, the Bridegroom, the Door, the Vine, the Lamb of God, the Mediator, the Great High Priest, the Lord, the Resurrection and the Life, the Alpha and the Omega, the Word. And last Sunday I introduced you to the image of Jesus as our king, and today, we are being introduced to yet another image: Jesus as our judge.

Each Sunday we recite the Nicene Creed, and part of what we affirm in that statement is we believe that Jesus will come again "to judge the living and the dead." That event is

commonly referred to as the last judgment, the final judgment or the day of judgment (to mention only a few).

Now, if we knew nothing more about that day other than what we could infer from its name, our feelings about it – at worst – might be fairly ambivalent. However, our thoughts about that day are colored, and more often than not towards the negative, by things like the fresco that Michelangelo painted on one wall of the Sistine Chapel. The imagery is, to say the least, unsettling. [refer to copy of fresco on bulletin board]

What's more, in recent Christian literature, the last installment of the popular "Left Behind" series is the book Glorious Appearing which reinforces this negative view on the second coming. Although I'll admit to not having read the book, a couple of parishioners who have read the book and whose opinions I respect, seemed most taken by the description of Jesus appearing on the scene, and really giving the bad guys what's coming to them.

And then, there was my college classmate who liked to wear a T-shirt that bore the image of an angry Jesus and the caption "Jesus is coming, and is is pissed."

I even saw a bumper sticker that proclaimed:

Jesus my Judge or Jesus my Lawyer

It's your choice.

Given all this, it's really no surprise that the second coming of Jesus, the coming of Jesus as judge, sets more than a few people to shaking in their boots. But something more needs to be added to all this: Despite Michelangelo's fresco, and the best-selling book, and my friend's T-shirt, we need to be reminded that the image of Jesus as an angry judge *has*

shallow roots in the New Testament. In fact, the image of Jesus as an angry judge is inconsistent with the image of Jesus portrayed in the gospels.

Karl Barth, who was an extremely important theologian and scholar of the New Testament, wrote these words:

In the Biblical world of thought, the judge is not primarily the one who rewards some and punishes others; [rather,] he is the man who creates order and restores what has been destroyed.

In other words, and according to Bart, when Jesus comes “to judge the living and the dead,” he will be coming to restore and inaugurate a new creation, and not to hand out rewards and punishments.

Therefore, and this is one of the messages of this Advent season, we do not have to face the end of this world as we know it with doubt, anxiety or fear, because it will be the second and final coming of God the Creator, of God the Savior, and of God the Restorer of the World, in whose wake the rule of God will prevail once and for all. The promise of the second coming of Jesus is, therefore, a message of hope.

Someone else, and I don’t know who, described it better:

The second coming is that final moment when the whole world, and history as we know it, will openly and totally belong to God. It is at that moment when the mission of the Church will be complete. The hunger and thirst for truth will be over. The Light of truth will overcome the darkness of ignorance and fear. Suffering and sadness,

death and disease will be no more. The struggle for justice in love, and for public obedience to God, will no longer be an issue. Peace, grounded in faith, will reign. The transfiguration of the world by Christ will unfold. At long last, every knee will bend and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father. And life itself will consist of praise.

With this wonderful picture, this hope-filled description of the last days, it's no wonder the New Testament closes with this prayer:

“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 21:20b)

It was eight years ago and, I believe, it was this time of year, that the whole Cook family had been down with the flu. All of us were housebound with sniffles, sneezes, coughs, fevers, and so forth. It was a nice day when we all began to feel better, so I went to work, and Peggy took the girls out into the back yard to play. In one corner of our back yard was a swing set, and in the other an enclosed dog run. Inside the dog run, situated in one corner, was a doghouse. Laura made a dash for the swings, while Emily headed for the dog run; once inside, Emily climbed to the very top of the dog house, grasped the top of the fence and began to look all around. “Emily, what are you doing?” Peggy asked. And Emily, who would have been around four years old then, answered, “I’m looking at the world.” And it was like she was seeing it again for the first time.

The season of Advent doesn't need to be a time of doubt or fear. In fact, it should be a wonderful, awe-filled season when we take the time to look around us – beyond so much of the brokenness that is often of our own doing – to see the marvelous and extraordinary things God is doing in the world. And the season of Advent reminds us that we need to practice

looking at the world with the eyes of a child; and see how the wonderful mysteries of God are constantly being unveiled.

Therefore, Advent is to be a time when we not only see the seed dying and falling from the tree, but also a time when we have the faith-borne patience to wait, and see how that seed just might germinate into a new life, and create a new tree that bears new fruit.

However, there is still a big difference between the world of here and now, and the world to which Advent points us. Christ has come, and we're celebrating his birthday in a few weeks. But the Kingdom of Christ has not come, at least not completely, and its effects haven't been fully realized. But this is our Advent challenge: To do whatever we can to bring this new vision to the people around us; to help them realize that what lies ahead is infinitely better and more glorious than what is behind us. This then is our goal: To help a broken and fallen world pray with us, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"