

Don't sweat the Day of Judgment.

Today is the first Sunday of the Season of Advent, which means that it's the first Sunday of the new church year. So, happy new year! But what's so special about Advent, that it deserves its own season? Well, Advent is about two things. It's about getting ready to celebrate the birthday of Jesus. And it's about taking the time to remember that we are still waiting for Jesus to come again, and establish his new and eternal kingdom.

Now, we all know what getting ready for Christmas means, but I think many of us are still a bit fuzzy about what it means to look forward to Jesus coming again. Well, think about what we say each week, in the Nicene Creed: that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. That event – that coming to judge – is commonly referred to as the Last Judgment, as the Final Judgment, or as the Day of Judgment. But what does all this mean?

I suspect that the average Christian has a fairly negative view of Jesus coming to be our judge, and those negative thoughts are colored by what we're exposed to in the world around us. Let me give you a few examples of what I mean.

In the African nation of Sudan, an English schoolteacher by the name of Gillian Gibbons, has run into a bit of trouble. She was recently arrested, tried, and convicted of allowing her Sudanese students to name a teddy bear – I suppose he was the class mascot – to name him Mohammed. Now, not only is Mohammed a common name among Moslem males, but it is also the name of their great prophet. Although I suspect that Ms. Gibbons was acting with the best of intentions, her decision was interpreted by conservative Muslims as an insult to the great prophet of God. Her punishment was fifteen days in jail. However, many others have been calling for her execution. Now think about that for a moment. If one of God's prophets (even though he is an Islamic prophet) gets pissed off because someone named a stuffed animal after him, how much more angry might God himself become when he is confronted with our transgressions, which must surely be greater than simply misnaming a teddy bear? And already, with this example alone, we are beginning to get a sense that diving judgment is not necessarily a good thing.

Consider, as well, this example. In his classic and oft-quoted eighteenth century sermon entitled *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) paints a picture of God as simply itching to send us to Hell for our transgressions. And Edwards describes how we move through life as though walking along a slippery slope, and who knows when our feet will lose their purchase. Not a good thought.

And in one of his masterpieces of fresco painting on a wall of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo depicts the Day of Judgment in very graphic detail, with Jesus sending the sinners into eternal torment with an almost cavalier gesture of his hand.

Finally, consider the billboard, on Interstate 35 going into Emporia, which reads something like “Accept Jesus Christ now, or regret it forever.” And my college classmate’s t-shirt which bore the image of an angry Jesus, with the words “Jesus is coming, and is he pissed!” And finally the bumper sticker I recently saw which declared “Jesus my Judge or Jesus my Lawyer. It’s your choice.” (Is that really much of a choice?)

Now if you put all of this together – the news item about the English schoolteacher, Jonathan Edward’s sermon, Michelangelo’s fresco, the billboard, the t-shirt, and the bumper sticker – and what we’re left with is a pretty negative view of divine judgment in general, and of the Day of Judgment in particular.

However, all of these examples notwithstanding, the average Christian needs to be reminded on a fairly regular basis that the image of Jesus as an angry judge, as a condemning judge, *has shallow roots in the New Testament*. In fact, it’s an image of Jesus that is *inconsistent* with that portrayed by the gospels. Karl Barth, who was an extremely important twentieth century theologian and scholar of the New Testament, once wrote:

“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 Barth, when Jesus comes “to judge the living and the dead,” as we profess in our Creed, he will be coming, not to hand out rewards and punishments, but rather to restore and inaugurate a new creation; and a new heaven and a new earth will follow in his wake.

Think about two examples from the Gospels that make this point fairly well. One day Jesus enters a town and encounters a wayward tax collector named Zacchaeus. You need to know that, in those days, tax collectors were seen as collaborators of the oppressive Roman regime, and therefore as working in opposition to, and to the detriment of, the people of God, and therefore of God himself. What does Jesus do with Zacchaeus? Does he condemn him? No. What does Jesus do? He invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus’s home. And Zacchaeus is so impressed and moved by this gesture, that he repents of his lifestyle and returns all of his ill-gotten goods.

Think also about the account of how, one day, a woman, who had been caught in the act of adultery, is brought before Jesus. Now the laws concerning her behavior are clear: she should be put to death by stoning. But what does Jesus do? Does he condemn her? No. He forgives her, and then tells her to change her behavior.

What I take from these two accounts is exactly that point that Barth is trying to make. The role of Jesus as Judge is not that of someone who metes out rewards and punishments (and especially punishments). Rather, the role of Jesus as our Judge is to be someone who creates order, and who restores what has been marred or ruined by human hands.

And so this, therefore, is one of the messages of the Season of Advent: We do not have to face the end of this world – the Day of Judgment, that is – with doubt, anxiety or fear. Rather, we can face it with joy and anticipation 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, and the promise of the Day of Judgment, therefore and for all, is a message of hope.

Someone else, and I don't know who, described it in these words:

“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 new 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 about eleven 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 off to work, and Peggy took the girls out into our back yard to play. In one corner of our back yard was a swing set, and in the other a ten-foot by twenty-foot kennel enclosed by a six-foot high chain-link fence. And inside the kennel, in one corner, was a doghouse. Well, Laura made a dash for the swings, while Emily headed for the kennel. 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 broken-ness 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!"