

## ***Waiting For The One Who Has Come***

Luke 21:25-36

December 3, 2006

### **I.**

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, which is a special time in the church calendar. It is the beginning of a well organized church year, with each season having distinct messages of hope, love, and how we live together as a Christian community.

And as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior on December 25, we begin by doing something a little different. We might have come here today expecting one thing but we just heard another. Rather than presenting a message about Jesus' birth in a manger two thousand years ago, I just read a lesson from Luke's Gospel about Jesus' second coming in a cloud with power and glory at a some future time unknown to us.

Why do we start the church year by talking about end times? Why, in the beginning, have we peeked at the ending? The answer is that God not only calls us to focus on the birth of Jesus, but also to recognize that his Son is the link between this world and the world to come.

What started with a child in Bethlehem is not yet complete. The coming of God's kingdom still is a work in process. The baby has been born, and we await his return. In Advent we recognize both. It is a time of joy and celebration, and we move in that direction over the next four weeks. But it also is a time of prayer and penitence, which is why we began our service today with the Penitential Order.

### **II.**

In thinking about these two different ways of looking at the season of Advent, I was reminded of the story of about some monks who lived at a remote monastery deep in the woods away from civilization. Their rule of life was enforced by a rigid vow of silence. Silence could be broken only once a year, on the first Sunday in Advent, and then by only one monk, who was allowed to speak only one sentence.

Well, on the first Sunday in Advent a few years ago it was Brother Thomas' turn to speak, and he rose and said, "It means so much to me to recognize Christ's birth during Advent," and he sat down. Total silence ensued for the next 365 days. Then on the first Sunday in Advent the following year, Brother Michael got his turn and said, "I am so moved during Advent by thinking about Christ's coming again," and sat down. Once again, there was silence in the monastery for an entire year. Then, a year later, on the first Sunday in Advent, Brother Paul rose and said, "I am fed up with this constant bickering!"

The truth, however, is that there is no need for argument. These two ideas about Advent are not inconsistent. One just naturally follows from the other.

And the notion of God's kingdom is a familiar part of our liturgy. As soon as I finish here we will say the Nicene Creed, and we will reaffirm that "he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

Shortly after that we will celebrate the Eucharist and we will proclaim in unison that "we remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, and we await his coming again in glory."

A few minutes later, as Fr. Jim sanctifies the bread and wine, you will hear him read the ancient prayer that our Lord will "bring us to that heavenly country where, with Thomas and all your saints, we may enter the everlasting heritage of your sons and daughters."

And then, when the service concludes we will sing that old familiar hymn, *Joy to the World*, which emphasizes the second coming as we proclaim the reign of our Lord and Savior and how he rules the world.

So what we heard today in today's gospel was not the story of a one-time event that is unrelated to our worship. In fact, for several centuries of the Church's history the purpose of Advent was to focus on God's kingdom on earth. In those times Christ's second coming in glory at the end of the age was emphasized more than his first coming in lowliness in the manger.

It was only during the twentieth century that joyful celebrations started to overshadow the more somber nature of the old tradition. Now, we celebrate both, and the gospel readings over the next four weeks will begin to shift in emphasis from the second coming to Christ's birth.

### **III.**

Let's look at today's reading. Luke uses apocalyptic and symbolic language that is similar to the description of end times in the Book of Revelation. He told us that we "will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory." And then he told us to be on guard so that the day will not catch us unexpectedly.

This means that Jesus' ministry still is not complete. In a way we live between two great ages. It is a time of already, but not yet. The Prince of Peace has already come, but God's peace at the end of history is not yet here. The world is still broken by sin and disobedience, and will not be fixed until the words of today's gospel reading come to pass.

Therein lies the challenge for our age. We are called by God to find a way to live in the meantime, in between times. But how do we live Christian lives in this contemporary world of pressures, temptations, and distractions?

### **IV.**

The first thing to understand, and I'm sure that we already do understand, is that the world out there will not help us. The community in here is our real source of strength.

Preparations in the world for Christmas and material things stand in stark contrast to the absence of preparations for spiritual things. Strong retail sales during Christmas seem far more important than strong relationships with God.

It's like the fellow who said to a friend that he used to feel close to God, but now God seems far away. The friend wisely asked, "so, who moved?" That's the problem. The world can separate us from God, and we can subconsciously put our faith on the back burner even though God does not change, and still is right where he always was.

Well, I have two things to say. The first might make us think. The second should be a source of assurance.

First, what difference does it make whether the second coming is on the verge of happening, or is centuries away? Would we live any differently in one case than in the other?

The temptation to do so might be there. It might be like when we were in school and the teacher said "I'm leaving the room and I'm not sure when I'll be back. But if I come back and find anyone out of their seat, they will go to the principal's office." Sound familiar?

And then what happened as more time passed and the teacher didn't return? Didn't we get restless? Weren't we tempted to cut up or misbehave as we waited and waited and the teacher still was away?

But there is a big difference between being in school back then, and living in the world now. If we actually got away with something before the teacher got back, there was a good chance that we would be home free, so to speak.

Is the same thing true now? Do we think that if Jesus is out of the room he will not know what we do? Do we think that all this end times stuff is somewhere out in the distant future and we will not be here when it happens, and so we shouldn't worry a lot about it?

Well, one of the things we learned in school is that the teacher always did come back. And in the same way, today's Gospel proclaims the certainty of Jesus' return.

Certainty is certainty. Inevitability is inevitability. And Christian responsibilities do not change. Jesus' instructions to his disciples and the people of his time apply equally to us now. We are called to be alert and ready. Our ancestors were called to be alert and ready. And our children and grandchildren will be called to be alert and ready. We have, and they will have, have the same responsibility until the promise of the gospel actually happens. Time will not cut us any slack. It's the same for everyone no matter what particular era in history in which we live.

This leads to my second point. We are not called to be alert out of fear or speculation, but through a sense of assurance. We should not feel a sense of impending doom, but rather the sure and certain hope of our salvation. This is not rocket science or complicated theology. We all can do it. We just have to think about it and make the effort.

And how should be alert? For what do we watch? Well, we are not on the lookout, watching for Jesus to come back to the room, so we can sound the alarm or get busy quick. Instead, we are called to watch how we live our own lives.

It's not like watching in the rear view mirror for a state trooper when we are speeding so we don't get caught. Rather it is more like watching our own driving so we don't have to worry about whether the trooper is there or not.

It is a spiritual rather than a physical watchfulness we are called to maintain. To be alert means living our lives by faith through the Holy Spirit in ways that show we are ready for his arrival. How do we do that? There are many different formulas and plans, and many different spiritual formation programs. Many of them can be helpful, but today I would like to briefly suggest four things to help us be alert, to help us watch.

First, we watch for patterns in our lives that are destructive, addictive, or that fulfill our pride or vanity, and we name them. Each of us, in some way or another, wrestles with that demon. It is virtually a standard confession for me every time I prepare to share in the Eucharist. Susan frequently reminds me at other times. Confession truly can be good for the soul.

Second, we watch for opportunities to extend ourselves to others, both neighbors and strangers. Human need is inherent in society, and we can miss it only by turning a blind eye. People are in misery, pain, and need everywhere, and the need can be material, physical, spiritual, or something else. If you feel even the slightest twinge in that direction, see where it leads you.

Third, we watch for temptation. I am not one of these people who believes that Satan is merely a symbol for the evils of human nature. Satan is a real spiritual being and is intent on separating you from God. And you cannot oppose Satan and win. He is too strong. All you can do is just turn away and turn toward Christ as your source of strength.

Fourth, we watch for the truth, which is an elusive commodity in today's society where morality can be relative, ethics can be situational, and the basic question can be whether

something works for me. We can become dangerously comfortable with a Christianity that is ready for the holiday cheer of Christmas, but is not ready for something as serious as the second coming.

## V.

These ideas are not carved in stone, but they are some approaches to be considered. I would, however, like to suggest there is one consistent theme that runs through all four of the things I just discussed. It is we must live in community with each other. We have horizontal relationships with God, but we also have vertical relationships among ourselves.

Our church community can be a focal point for how we carry out Jesus' instruction to be alert and not be caught unexpectedly. Support groups, prayer groups, and accountability partners can help us with things in our lives we want to change. The ministries of the church enable us to help others, and ourselves. And the church's emphasis on Scripture, both in worship and education, supports knowing God's truth.

And finally, if we believe that Christ will come again to complete God's kingdom, then those relationships can help us to live by faith in a way that shows we are ready for his arrival. Through our community here at St. Thomas we can live a Christian life now in anticipation of sharing the Christian hope later. *Amen.*