

The Coming Kingdom

Matthew 24:36-44

November 28, 2010

I.

Happy New Year! This is new year's day in the church. That's because our church calendar is not like the one at home that begins on January 1. The church year begins today, the First Sunday in Advent.

And like the regular calendar, which has seasons of summer, fall, winter, and spring, today begins our church seasons with names like Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter, each with its own message of hope, love, and encouragement as we live together as a Christian community.

What do we mean by Advent? If we look at the newspapers we might think it comes from the word "advertise." The Friday after Thanksgiving was the biggest shopping day of the year. And prophecy said that a third of the earth would be covered with shoppers, and the countdown would begin for the final conflict between the forces of buyers and sellers.

Seriously, however, the traditional meaning of Advent is that something is beginning, or that something or someone is coming. Today's Gospel reading makes that point in a way that seems out of order, doesn't it?

We might think we should be starting with the celebration of Christ's birth two thousand years ago. But instead, we heard about Christ's coming again, for the second time, at the end of history. And we are told that we must be ready because we do not know when it will occur.

Why do we do this? Why, as we begin the church year, have we peeked at the ending? Aren't we telling the story backwards? Yes, we are, but we do it to emphasize that the reality of God's kingdom at the end of days is implicit in Christ's birth at the beginning.

II.

So let's consider the prospect of Jesus Christ coming again to establish God's kingdom on earth. Is that really what we want to happen? Two years ago Kenny Chesney recorded a country-western song that said, "Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to go now."

Is it the same way with Christ's second coming? Suppose I asked everyone who wants Christ to come again, right now, to raise their hands. And then suppose I asked everyone who does not want Christ to come again, right now, to raise their hands.

Would our response be like that Kenny Chesney song? Would we say, "Yes Jesus, please come, but not quite yet. Please come later, if you don't mind." And if that is how we feel, what are we waiting for? Is there something we have not yet done?

Perhaps I could set the stage for examining today's Gospel with the story I told last year at this time about the spider and the bug. And the context is the harvest of souls on that final day.

Once upon a time a spider lived in a wheat field. He liked his home, and planned to stay there for the rest of his life. And one day a little bug got caught in the spider's web. And as the spider was getting ready to eat him, the bug said, "If you let me go I will tell you something that will save your life."

The spider stopped, and told the bug to go ahead. "You better get out of this wheat field and find some other place to live," the bug said, "because the harvest is coming! All the wheat will be cut and gathered up, and you will be destroyed if you just stay here. You won't be ready."

The spider replied, "I've heard that before. I don't believe that stuff about harvests and separating wheat from chaff." So the spider ate the bug for lunch. A few days later, the spider thought about the bug's warning and said to himself, "A harvest! That's foolish! I've lived here all my life and nothing like that has ever happened. Why, I even remember when these stalks of wheat were just a couple inches out of the ground. I don't have to change anything."

The next day was beautiful and sunny in the wheat field. The sky was clear and there was no wind at all. That afternoon as the spider was about to take a nap, he noticed some thick dusty clouds moving toward him, and then the ground began to vibrate. He could hear the roar of a great engine getting closer and closer, and he said to himself, "I wonder what that could be?"

We have heard similar stories, haven't we? And they usually contain some pearl of wisdom and tell about an ill-fated central character who thought he knew best and had all the answers.

And even though we might chuckle at these stories, the morals they contain and the messages they convey are not laughing matters. Today's Gospel is equally serious. Jesus said he will come again, unexpectedly and suddenly, and no one knows the day or time.

But this does not mean we are to live in fear of judgment. Jesus wanted to encourage us in today's lesson, not scare us. In First Thessalonians Paul said, "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9). And so the words of today's Gospel are not a threat, but rather words of hope that carry an eternal promise.

But we also are told to be ready. Jesus said to be awake and alert, and I don't think he was promoting coffee or caffeine pills. Rather, he was talking about putting God first, and living our lives as though we might actually see him coming in the clouds tomorrow.

III.

But do we really think that way? What difference does it make whether the second coming is about to happen, or is centuries away? Would we live differently in one case than in the other? Does the prospect of the future second coming actually affect our lives today?

Here's an example that might illustrate the point. Remember 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'll go to the principal's office." Sound familiar?

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

But there's a big difference between being in school then and living in the world now. If we got away with something in school before the teacher got back, the teacher probably would not know.

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 in the distant future and we will never see it, so we shouldn't worry about it?

Well, one of the things we learned in school is that the teacher always did come back. In the same way, today's Gospel proclaims the certainty of Jesus' return and calls us to be ready.

But being ready does not mean being on the lookout, watching for Jesus to come back to the room, as we might have watched for our teachers so we quickly could get back into our seats. Instead, we are called to be ready all the time in the way we live our lives.

And we do so not from fear, but with assurance. We should not anticipate impending doom, but rather the sure and certain hope of our salvation. We all have the opportunity to be prepared.

But our preparation involves spiritual rather than physical readiness. Today's Gospel calls us to go to church as well as to the gym. And there are some things we might consider as we get ready for that inevitable day. We might think of them as spiritual new year's resolutions.

For example, we can resolve to get rid of patterns in our lives that are destructive, addictive, or that indulge our pride or vanity. Each of us, in some way or another, wrestles with those demons. Pride usually is a standard confession for me.

And we can resolve to extend ourselves to others. Human need is everywhere, both here in the church and in the community. There always is work to be done to help other people.

We also can resolve to confront temptation, and to seek forgiveness if we fail. I have said before that Satan is not just a symbol of the bad side of human nature. Satan is a real spiritual being and is intent on separating us from God. And we cannot oppose Satan and win. He is too strong. All we can do is just turn away and turn toward Christ as our source of strength.

Finally, we can be ready to know God's 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 or not something works. The truth, however, as I have said before, is revealed in Scripture and does not change to suit our own purposes. God's truth is not based in our own wishful thinking.

IV.

So, here we are. God's kingdom is a work in progress. The Prince of Peace already has come, but God's peace at the end of history is not yet here. The incomplete revelation of God's kingdom that we have today contends with a world still broken by suffering and disobedience. And that world will not be completely fixed until the words of today's Gospel come to pass.

Therein lies our challenge, to live in a world of already, but not yet. We are called to live Christian lives in the midst of a contemporary world of pressures, temptations, and distractions.

In some ways today's Gospel reminds me of the priest at a gas station, waiting in line before a long holiday weekend to fill up his car. When he got out to stretch, one of the cashiers, who was a member of the priest's church, saw him and came outside and said, "I'm sorry about the delay Father, it seems that everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The priest chuckled and said, "I know what you mean. It's the same in my business."

I pray that we don't wait until the last minute to watch and be prepared, and that we can live in ways that always make us ready for his coming again. And as we start our new year here at St. Thomas, perhaps we can adopt some of those spiritual new year's resolutions to guide us along the way. *Amen.*