

The God Who Comes

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Isaiah 40:1-5 and
1 Thessalonians 5:1-
11

Sermon Series:
iReady?

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Today, we embark on the season of Advent. The word “advent” means “to come,” and we remember, celebrate and anticipate the God who comes. Now we often think of Advent as celebrating the coming of Christ as a baby, but that is only part of it. Our Scripture text points to another advent. Peter Blois, a famous preacher of the twelfth century also wrote, “There are three comings of our Lord: the first in the flesh, the second in the soul, and the third at the judgment.... The first coming was humble and hidden, the second is mysterious and full of love, the third will be majestic and terrible....In his first, a Lamb; in his last a Lion; in the one in between the two, the tenderest of friends.”

During this season, we prepare our hearts for three advents—past, present and future. In the next few minutes, I want to address all three, reflecting on the God who comes to us, bringing us faith, hope and love.

The Old Testament lectionary texts that we read and the hymns we sing during Advent don’t make much sense unless we understand the context in which they were given. They are generally prophecies given to the people of Israel around the time of their captivity in Babylon. It was an intense period of suffering for the nation.

They lived under the oppression of a foreign regime. They knew the experience of being homeless, continually at war, and even prisoners. They were the people of God, chosen by God, and this was not what they had expected. They longed for the Messiah to come and set things right.

For those who were hurting, suffering, and in real pain because of their sin, it meant something to hear the words we heard in our call to worship:

“Comfort, O comfort my people,” says your God,

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem;

And call out to her, that the warfare has ended,

That the iniquity has been removed.”

Through the years of exile, oppression and persecution, the people of Israel yearned for God to come to them as they waited and waited for the Messiah.

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the promises, all the prophecies, all the purposes of God. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated by the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. The words of a Christmas carol put it very well: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The “God who comes” first came in the form of a baby over two thousand years ago. Those of us who recently went to Israel saw with our

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own eyes the cave in Bethlehem where Jesus was born and lay in a manger, the ruins of the village of Nazareth where Jesus was a boy and grew up, the very spot on the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized by John, the desert wilderness where he fasted for 40 days and was tempted by the devil, and the region around the Sea of Galilee where he ministered, where he performed many miracles like the multiplication of the loaves and fishes to feed 5000, and gave the greatest sermon ever given—the Sermon on the Mount.

We spent some days in Jerusalem, where we walked on the very stone streets where Jesus walked, sat on the very steps where he would have preached, visited the ruins of the Pool of Salome and Bethesda where he healed the blind and the lame, stood on the Mount of Olives and heard the Scripture of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the donkey, saw the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was betrayed and arrested, descended into the dungeon prison at the palace of Caiaphas, where he was tried, went to the place where Jesus' real human body "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried and on the third day rose again," according to the Scriptures.

As we visited place after place, the truth I have known and believed for so long sank a little deeper into my heart and soul. Our God is a God who has come to us in a real time and real space. Eugene Peterson translates John 1:14 in *The Message* like this:

"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." We had the privilege of witnessing the neighborhood that Jesus moved into.

The "God who comes" first came in the incarnation. The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, humbled himself and was born into this world as a tiny baby to a virgin named Mary in the town of Bethlehem. This is a staggering truth.

Friends, our faith is not some esoteric idea. Our faith is grounded in a real person—Jesus of Nazareth and the historical events that happened to him in real time and space. As 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 says, we have received salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ and what he did for us in his death and resurrection.

As I said earlier, in Advent we not only celebrate the first coming of Christ and the redemption he has brought us, but we also remember and celebrate the hope that we have as we await his coming again. For a year and a half, we have been talking about God's Big Story of creation, fall, and redemption, but there is actually a fourth word—consummation. Our Scripture passage for today focuses on the consummation.

The God who comes is a God who will come again in glory. This is the hope of our salvation. We live in the in-between times of Christ's first and second comings. The kingdom has been inaugurated, but it has not been completely fulfilled. Our hope is grounded in the truth that Jesus will return and will make everything new. Paul writes that a group of believers was confused and

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even fearful about that day, but frankly, I wonder how many of us really think about the second coming at all.

Perhaps one reason we do not think about the second coming is because our view of Christ is limited—even distorted. I think, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit to our human impulse to domesticate God. It's easier to think of the humble and hidden coming of the baby Jesus than it is to think about him as a lion and a king, whose second coming will be “majestic and terrible” as he battles evil and sets everything right, once and for all.

Perhaps thoughts of the Second Coming rattle us and unsettle our sense of control. Let's face it, we live in an information age and a power culture. Many of us live with the illusion that we can know what we want to know, and we can control what happens to us. But when it comes to the Second Coming, that isn't true. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

Over the years, many have speculated about when the Second Coming will happen, but Jesus himself said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

While we can't know when the Day of the Lord will come, we can be sure that it will. Paul uses the image of childbirth. An expectant mother knows that the day and hour that that child comes into the world is in the hands of God, but she knows it is imminent, and she

must prepare. So we who live in the days after Christ's first coming know that his return is imminent, and that we, too, must be prepared.

Perhaps another reason we don't think about the Second Coming is because, in our culture, we have a great deal of affluence, comfort, and, thus, a sense of security. Notice in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, Paul mentions “peace and safety.” This was a popular slogan of the Roman propaganda machine. The promise of peace and security was what Rome offered to those people who submitted (willingly or unwillingly) to Roman rule and military power; it was seen as Rome's gift to those it conquered, virtually equivalent to an offer of deliverance or “salvation” from turmoil and danger.

But from Paul's perspective, any such claims are misleading and deceptive and, therefore, dangerous. No social institution can guarantee our future. No economic organization or enterprise can guarantee our economic security. No form of government can deliver on the promise of peace and safety. The only genuine source of eternal peace and security is trust in God and his Messiah, Jesus Christ the Lord. That and that alone will deliver us from the wrath and destruction that will accompany the coming Day of the Lord.

A final reason we may not think about the second coming is due to a sense of apprehension at the idea of wrath, destruction, and the judgment to come. But Paul goes out of his way to emphasize that we do not need to fear the Second Coming but rather to anticipate it with joy. Paul

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uses the imagery of light and darkness, day and night to designate “insiders” and “outsider.” “Night” and “darkness” are associated with alienation from God and ignorance about the imminence of the Day of the Lord. The wrath of God is real and to be feared by those who don’t know Christ.

But God has destined us for salvation rather than wrath, which is the very thing from which Jesus will deliver us. For those of us who are children of the light or children of the day—who know Christ and have the light of God in them through faith in Christ—we can anticipate with joy the coming of the Lord. For in that day, we will enjoy an even deeper level of fellowship and life together with our risen Lord, and we will be with the Lord forever.

As I was writing this sermon, I couldn’t help but think of a scene in C.S. Lewis’s wonderful book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It sums up our misconceptions about the coming of our Lord and clarifies what our attitude toward that day should be. The children have just learned from Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan. Susan asks,

“Who is Aslan?”

“Aslan?” said Mr. Beaver, “Why don’t you know? He’s the King... It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus....”

“Is—is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is

the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh! said Susan.” I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

“I’m longing to see him,” said Peter, “even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point.”

We can trust that the God who comes is good, and His coming again will be very good for those who trust Him. Peter’s longing to see the lion Aslan ought to reflect our longing to see Jesus face-to-face. We must be people who live in a permanent state of hope and expectation. We must live forever in the shadow of eternity, in the certainty that we are people who are fitting or unfitting ourselves to appear in the presence of God. As with the coming of Christmas Day, we cannot make it happen sooner because we are eager, nor can we delay it because we are not ready. However, we can be awake and alert, standing on tiptoe, wide-eyed and watchful, ready to receive Him whenever he comes.

And that leads to the final advent I want to address—the God who comes to us even here and now. So

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often we do not experience the God who comes because we are waiting for something to change in our lives. We are waiting to get married, or to have children, or until the children are older, or they have left home, or until we get a new job, or retire from the job we are in, or.... You get the picture. Every day is meant to be an advent because Jesus is Emanuel, God-always-with-us. The God who comes is “full of love and comes as the tenderest of friends” every moment of our ordinary, everyday lives.

In his book, *Making All Things New*, Henry Nouwen writes, “The spiritual life is not a life before, after, or beyond our everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now.” Like Jesus in his real human body and real human life, we, too, are to live a life of love grounded in the present time and space where we find ourselves. Advent is a perfect time to practice the spiritual life in the midst of our everyday existence, whatever that is for us.

If we are in a difficult or dark time, we can name the darkness and let that deep longing come to the surface as we wait like so many who have waited before for God to come to us in our grief, pain, and trouble as only he is able. We can reflect on Jesus, the light of the world—the light that shines in the darkness.

If we are in a joyful time of life, celebrating a new beginning of marriage, a new baby, or a new

opportunity, we can reflect on and give thanks for the new ways we see God coming to us.

Whatever circumstance we are in, we need to intentionally look for the God who comes to us as we adore him in worship, wait for him in prayer, listen to him through his Word, experience his love through community. Christ surprises us by coming at the times, in the places, and through the people we least expect, startling us with grace and bringing us new life.

One of the startling moments of our trip to Israel was at the Garden tomb just as we were about to celebrate communion. Herb Reinhart said that he wanted to say a few words, and I invited him to do so. He said that this trip was significant to all of us, but especially for me as a pastor visiting the Holy Land for the first time. To commemorate that, he and Michelle Rahal had picked up this beautiful stole for me in a shop in Jerusalem and wanted to present it to me on behalf of the entire community that was there to remember the time in Israel. I was speechless because I was surprised and overwhelmed. But it was a moment when Christ came to me in a profound way.

Christ has come to me through the love of his people over the course of my life’s journey, and he continues to pour out his love to me and my family through this community here at VPC, and most recently through the community who traveled in Israel. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 11: “Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are

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doing.” I am so grateful for the love and encouragement I receive regularly from this family of faith.

I am thankful to wear this stole and to preach on this first Sunday of Advent. The stole reminds me not only of the experience of being in Jerusalem but, more important, the God who comes to me. The large cross in this Jerusalem cross reminds me of Jesus, who has come in real flesh and blood to die on the cross for our sins bringing us faith. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” The great gift of life is a relationship with God. If you haven’t received this gift of salvation in Christ, Advent is a wonderful time to invite Jesus—the God who comes—into your life. Faith is giving your life to the one who gave his life for you.

While the large cross reminds us of Jesus and Jerusalem where he died, the four small crosses symbolize the four gospels that are to be preached to the four corners of the world. I am reminded of the invitation to the Lord’s Supper that says, “They will come from east and west, north and south to sit at table in the kingdom of God.” The God who comes brings us hope that not only we but people from every tongue, tribe and nation will be in the new heaven and new earth. And we await his coming again with joy and great expectation.

And, finally, this stole reminds me of how we are to live in the

here and now. This stole is a symbol of ministry for a pastor. I am called as a leader of the community to love and serve the people, but all of us are ministers of God’s grace, called to “love one another as Christ has loved us.” As we share the journey, we experience the God who comes to us in the Word read and proclaimed, the waters of baptism, the bread and wine of his holy meal, through the love of Christian community. While we await the return of the Lord, we really can live in such a way that we experience the reality of God with us even now, and that is our greatest witness to the world.

I hope that throughout all of this Advent season we will see God coming to us in the wonderful opportunities and celebration of this season. But I hope we will also prayerfully consider how God might be calling us to arrange our lives to recognize His coming to us each moment of each day as we await His coming again.

As we celebrate the coming of the Lord, may Paul’s prayer at the end of 1 Thessalonians be our prayer too: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

