

Do You Really Think He Is Going To Come?

Acts 3:11-21; Revelation 22:8-12

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Advent is a season in which we celebrate within the Church the one who came, the one who comes, and the one who will come. Advent means coming, to approach for a visitation. Israel was that nation of people who throughout their history looked for one who would come, who would be anointed with the Spirit of God. The Hebrew word *Messiah* means “the anointed one.” The Messiah was the one that Israel hoped for, prayed for, and longed for in order that God’s will might be done on earth as in heaven. The anointed one, the Messiah, the longed-for one was anticipated every time a priest was anointed with oil or a king was enthroned and anointed again with oil, for the oil, the sign of the Spirit, was a sign of God’s empowering through the Spirit. Every priest and every king was a sign pointing to that one who one day would come supremely, full of the Spirit of God, and would bring justice and peace and Shalom.

The Christian Church believes that the awaited one indeed did come, and that one was Jesus of Nazareth. Sometimes we speak of Jesus Christ as though it is a first and last name, but that is not correct. Christ is a title. Jesus of Nazareth was believed in the Church to be the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah, the one long looked for by Israel, the one who would bring the will of God into effect on earth. In the Christian Church, the expectation that this Jesus of Nazareth was the one grew in various ways among his disciples and his followers. And then he was crucified. Those who had hoped despaired, for they said, “We thought that Jesus might be the one! But a crucified Messiah? No way!” But when Jesus was raised from the dead and he appeared to them, they rejoiced. They also began to see that the fulfillment of God’s plan and purpose came in a way quite other than they had expected. It was a new and surprising way, but they believed that this Jesus who was crucified, resurrected and in the presence of God was the reigning Lord whom they expected imminently.

I read from the Book of Acts this morning because it reflects one of the very earliest conceptions of these events that would mark the end. Peter, who had presented Jesus as the one who was crucified and raised by God, says to those who were listening, “Repent.” That is, change your mind. Turn around. Repent and understand that this one whom you crucified was God’s servant, indeed the

Messiah. He says, “Repent. Turn to God that your sins may be wiped out, so that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed, that is, Jesus.”

Now when you think about that for a moment, it is rather interesting. “Repent that the seasons of refreshing may come. That he may send the Messiah.” Well, didn’t they believe that Jesus was the Messiah who had already come? Yes. But it would seem as though in this conception, at least in those early days when everything was fuzzy, they were saying Jesus was the Messiah, but that he was in the presence of God now, as though heaven is keeping him until you repent and turn, and the seasons of refreshing come and there is the universal restoration. Then God will send the Messiah appointed to you again, that is, Jesus.

Now that conception of things did not prevail in the New Testament Church, but it was one of the earliest understandings—Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah, in heaven for a while but soon to return. The expectation of the return was obviously very vivid and the return was to be imminent. At the end of the Revelation to John, the revelation of the ascended Lord, the Book of Revelation, Chapter 22, we have these words of the ascended Lord who gives the vision to John. He says, “Behold I am coming soon.”

How soon is soon? What do you think? What would be soon? He says at the tail end of the first century, “I am coming soon.” What do we give him? Six months? Or would you give him a year? Ah, somebody over here says, “I’ll give him two years.” How soon is soon? What do you think? How about two thousand years? That’s not soon. That’s not soon according to any kind of soon I’ve ever understood. And yet for two thousand years there have been preachers taking this text and saying, “Go outside and watch the sky because it may be today.”

If we had more time this morning I’d sing for you a chorus of “Jesus Is Coming Again.” I am really tempted to do it, but I won’t. “Jesus Is Coming Again,” and you can flip your dial anywhere you want to on the radio today and you’ll hear preachers all over the country saying, “Repent, because Jesus is coming and it may be today.” How long can you hold your breath? How far can you stretch this thing out and still talk about Jesus coming soon? Do you think he is coming? Do you think he is coming soon?

I don’t think you do. In all honesty, I don’t think you do. I think after two thousand years, anybody that expects Jesus to appear on earth soon and establish a kingdom is simply going along with a traditional conception of things that has had a strong hold on the Christian Church. But I don’t think we really believe it.

That raises a question for me. Was perhaps what the New Testament Church understood about Jesus true, but cast in a form that really could not carry the freight for us into modern or postmodern times? This is the way I have come to understand it, the way I have found most helpful in trying to translate all of the

imagery of the second coming, the end events, and the rapture (or is it the rapture), the great white throne, the final judgment, heaven and hell and all of that—the end events. The way that I have come to translate that for myself is in the same way that I have come to translate the opening chapters of Genesis. Somehow or other, in the stories of the beginning we have been able to accept the symbolic presentation of profound truth, moving away from the literal understanding. But at the other end, we've never been able to shed the literal translations of those images and understand them symbolically.

Think about the beginning. You don't really think there was a garden called Eden, do you? You don't really think there was a Mr. Adam or a Mrs. Eve. Do you believe there was a snake, a tree, an apple? Well, with Adam and Eve, of course, there was a pair. And they do say of Eve that she was a peach, but not an apple with a worm! Not a snake, a talking snake! Yet the story's message was full of truth. It was the Hebrew understanding of what was going on in their own time and in their own existence. What they said essentially was, "Everything that is, is, because God said, 'Let there be.'" God said, "Let there be." And "It is very good." Well, then they said, "If it was created very good, why it is so bad? How come everything is so rotten?" And they said, "It's not God's fault. It is our fault, because we, who were created to worship and adore and serve, usurped God's place in proud rebellion and self-assertion. We wanted to be God. And so it was we who made hell on earth."

That's what those chapters tell us. And what they tell us is profoundly true of our existential experience of the human situation where we are drawn to heaven and mired in earth, caught in the tension of worshiping and rebelling, wanting to be God and yet wanting to be God's. In those symbolic representations of garden and tree and snake and apple, all of the most profound truth of the cosmos of God, of the human situation, comes to the fore.

It has been a long time since I've been able to negotiate all of that and come to a deeper understanding of biblical truth. Yet it is only recently that I dealt with the other end of it in Revelation in the same way. All of those images of the golden city, the streets of gold, the tree for the healing of the nations—all of those images picked up from the Old Testament really tell us that paradise was lost. But in the End, paradise will be regained. The garden out of which we were driven becomes the city into which we are invited. Essentially the Bible says that God, who in the beginning had good plans for us, will consummate those plans ultimately in the end. What the Biblical message is trying to say in those allusions to Jesus crucified, risen, ascended, reigning, and returning may have meant to intimate a pouring out of his Spirit, the Spirit of God for us, the community which is the body of Christ.

Jesus did say, according to John's Gospel, "I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you." Pentecost was the coming of the risen one. The Spirit of God, or the

Spirit of Jesus, is with us forming the community. The community is the body of Christ, which is to live out the life according to the example of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus was the anointed one. Jesus was full of the Spirit. And Jesus lived a life according to the intention of God. Those who follow Jesus are those who form concretely the community of God's people where God reigns, where there is righteousness and justice and mercy and peace, where love abounds. Those end references are simply the only way we can talk about these kinds of things, by which we bear witness to our conviction that it's not all going to come to naught, but that ultimately God's way will prevail. God's purposes will be realized and we will be gathered into the eternal brightness of God's presence with all God's people.

All of the imagery and symbolism of the New Testament is simply a testimony to the conviction of the early Church that God had acted decisively in Jesus and the end was no more in question. It is something like a chess game, to which I get subjected every once in a while by my grandson Derek on Sunday afternoon when I am tired and brain dead. The mistake I made was to let my son Joseph, when he was a little boy, teach me to play chess . . . a little bit. Now I'm humiliated week after week by my grandson.

But two weeks ago I was doing quite well. I actually had more off the board than he did, and I thought I might have a chance of licking him until that fateful move when I unthinkingly did the wrong thing, and I knew it. I thought, the good news is I am going to be able to take my nap! It was over. So I just put my king out there where he could get me. He said, "Oh, no, Bumpa. No, no, no. There's another move you can make."

So I made the move, and he had to make another move, and I could make another move. But it was all over. All he was doing was dancing me all over the board until finally he got me into the corner where there was no more wiggle room. "Checkmate!"

In the early Church, in God's chess match with all that was opposed to God, what happened in Jesus was that decisive move. There is no possibility that God will not be all in all. But there is still a little wiggle room. As people of God, we believe in that already, of the presence of the kingdom, a kingdom not yet in its fullest expression. In the meantime God is with us.

Do you want me to tell you three things that sum up everything that I could possibly suggest you believe and bet your life on? They are these: God in the beginning, God in the end, and God in the meantime. In the beginning all that is, is because God said, "Let there be." In the end, God will be all in all. And in the meantime, *Immanuel*, God is with us in the flesh of Jesus who came to us and continues in the ongoing community of God's people in the bread and in the cup, tokens of a presence with us now.

Where is history going? I don't really know. What will happen to planet earth? I haven't got a clue. I simply know that for myself and those I have loved and lost, and for my children and my children's children—in the beginning, God. In the end, God. And in the meantime, God in tokens of bread and cup, and word, and in the flesh of the community—in the other that one loves and in whose face one sees God. That's enough.

I will sing, "He is coming, He will come again," and by that I mean poetically in song, liturgically in worship, that I adore the God who has called us into being and has come to us and will finally fulfill every promise when we are gathered eternally in the brightness of God's presence. Thank God.

Do you really think God is going to come? No, you don't. But don't you know that God is with you and that you could never move beyond the grip of God's grace? Of course, you do. And that's enough. That's all you need. That's true!