

Life After Life?

Text Psalm 16:11; I Thessalonians 4:17

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Spring Lake, Michigan

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In your presence there is fullness of joy... Psalm 16:11

...and so we will be with the Lord forever... I Thessalonians 4:17

The Season of Advent is a season in which we celebrate in the Church the One who came, the One who comes and the One who will come. *Advent*, the word itself, means to approach or a visitation. And Israel was that people who all of their history looked for one who would come, that one who would come, who would be anointed with the Spirit of God. "The one who would be anointed" - the Hebrew word was *Messiah* - the anointed one. The Messiah was the one who Israel hoped, 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 predicted every time a priest was anointed with oil or a king was enthroned, anointed again with oil. For the oil, the sign of the Spirit, was a sign of God's empowering of the Spirit, and 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 that one indeed did come, and that one was Jesus of Nazareth. Sometimes we speak of Jesus Christ as though it was 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 longed 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 they were despairing for they said, "We thought that this might be the one. But a crucified Messiah? No way." But then he was raised from the dead and he appeared to them, and then they rejoiced. Then they began to see that the fulfillment of God's plan and purpose came in a way quite other than they had expected. In a new

way. In a surprising way. But they believed that Jesus, crucified, resurrected, and in the presence of God, was their reigning Lord whom they expected imminently.

In fact, 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, in having 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 is God's servant, indeed the Messiah." He says, "Repent. Turn to God that your sins might 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 for you. 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 in those early days when everything was fuzzy, they were saying Jesus was the Messiah but he was in the presence of God now and it was as though heaven were keeping him until you repent and turn, and the seasons of refreshing come and there is a universal restoration; then God will send the Messiah appointed to you, 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, soon to return. The expectation of the return of this one was obviously very vivid and the return was to be imminent.

At the conclusion of the revelation given to John, the revelation of the ascended Lord – at the conclusion of the Book of Revelation, in the 22nd chapter, we have these words of the ascended Lord who gives the vision to John. He says, "Behold I am coming soon." Now, how soon is soon? What do you think? Soon. He says, "Here 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 would 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. But 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 would sing for you a chorus "Jesus is Coming Again." I'm really tempted to do it, (Laughing) but I won't do it. 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 soon on earth and establish a kingdom is simply going along with a traditional conception of things that has a strong hold on the Christian Church, but I don't think we really believe it. And that raises a question

to me as to whether or not the New Testament Church understood about Jesus, and the summing up of all things might have been true but it was cast in a form that really cannot carry the freight for us today two thousand years later.

The way that I have come to understand this and have found most helpful in trying to translate all of that imagery of the Second Coming and the end events – and the rapture, or is it the rupture? The Second Coming, 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 beginning we have been able to deal with the symbolic presentation of profound truth, moving away from the literal understanding, but over at this end we have never been able to get off the literalization of those images and understand them symbolically.

But if we are over here in 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 and a Mrs. Eve? A snake? A tree? An apple? Well, with Adam and Eve, of course, there was pear. (Laughter) They say of Eve that she was a peach. (Laughter) But not an apple with a worm. Not a snake, a talking snake. (Laughter) No. But what it says is so true. It was Israel's understanding of what was going on in their own present existence. And what they said essentially was, "Everything that is is because God said let there be." And God said, "Let there be," and God said, "It's very good." And then they said, "If it's very good, how come it's so bad? How come everything is so rotten?" And they said, "Not God's fault – our fault because we who were created to worship and adore and serve, usurped God's place in proud rebellion, in self assertion wanting to be God. We made hell on earth." That's what those chapters tell us. And what they tell us is profoundly true and touches our own existential experience of the human situation where we are drawn to heaven and mired on earth and caught in the tension of worshiping and rebelling, wanting to be God and yet wanting to be God's. And in those symbolic representations of garden and tree and snake and apple and all of that, the most profound truth of the cosmos, of God, and of the human situation comes to expression. Somehow or other a long time since, I've been able to negotiate that and come to a deeper understanding of biblical truth.