

Advent Hope: Jesus Will Bring Us All Together Again

Text: I Thessalonians 4: 14; 5: 9-10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

My soul doth magnify the, Lord.

Our Advent hope is that deep assurance in our heart that Jesus Christ will bring us all together again. The biblical word is clear that our hope is sure, that we shall be redeemed, not only in this our present life, but through death into life eternal. We shall be together with the Lord. Not only together with the Lord, one to one, but all together, all together with the Lord – all together in the brightness of His eternal presence. That is the Christian hope; that is the Advent hope.

Paul brings together very intimately the relationship of the coming again of Jesus and the realization of that final hope of the Christian Church. In this Letter to the Thessalonians, which was perhaps the earliest letter that we have from Paul, we have him dealing to a great extent with the coming again of Jesus. Paul must have gone through that ancient world with such passion and intensity focused on the event of Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection, and his coming again, that he put his hearers on tinder hooks, as it were. He got his congregation to sit on the edge of their seats, to catch their breath, and to study the skies to wait for a rift in the clouds and the appearance of Jesus Christ. We know that, after writing this first letter, which must have reflected what he had preached to them, he had to write them a second letter which said to them, "Now wait a minute. It's good to get excited about these things, but a real part of life is also business as usual. So, don't quit your jobs, don't file for your Social Security, don't collect your pensions yet, don't take that world cruise on your life insurance. Keep working and waiting and watching and be alert. Jesus is coming, but in the meantime, be responsible and be active in your Christian life." He had to write to them to correct a sense of expectancy that was causing them to let go in the immediate expectation of all of this to happen.

Paul didn't know what was going to happen, and he didn't know when it was going to happen - he simply believed that something would happen that would involve the appearance of Jesus who had been here, crucified and risen, and which would involve, as well, the summing up of all of history. We have to

restructure what Paul said because we don't believe in the physical universe like Paul understood it. Heaven was up, earth was in the middle, hell was down - a three-story universe. The ups and downs of Paul are not the beyonds of the physical universe as we know it. We know that Paul shared with the early Church that sense of the imminent return of Jesus Christ, but we certainly cannot, after 2,000 years, continue to hold our breath. And it really doesn't work for us to try to whip up some kind of emotion, to psych ourselves up so we can recapture that sense of the imminent coming of Jesus.

I was reflecting on that myself. The Advent season - I'm really thankful for the return of the season. It becomes increasingly meaningful for me to celebrate this season because I am confronted again these weeks with the cry, "Come, Lord Jesus." And our prayer this morning said something to the effect that our hymn is our prayer - "Come, thou long-expected Jesus." And yet, good friends, to be honest, most of us live most of our days without really thinking very much about that or anticipating that or praying for that, let alone longing for that. It was different in the wake of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. It was different in that first century when Paul had a sense of all of this now coming to its fruition, believing that the resurrection of all the saints would follow immediately on the resurrection of Jesus. He spoke of the resurrection of Jesus as the first fruits, and the first fruits are the first grain ripened of the harvest, but the whole harvest follows immediately. And surely it would have boggled Paul's mind if he would have had any sense that some 2,000 years later we would be taking his word and looking for the same event.

The whole structure of the universe, the whole understanding of the scheme of the time calendar of the events of the redemption, all of that needs to be renegotiated. We really need not to stumble over the fact that Paul expected Jesus immediately, and it's been 2,000 years, or that he expected him to come from above, even though we know there is no above or below - all of that is structuring and symbolism. The only kinds of tools and equipment that were available to speak about these mysteries need to be retranslated and reinterpreted in our own experience, and I don't really know how to do that.

It's not terribly important, if we continue to focus on the message and the essence of the matter. Paul was saying to Christians at Thessalonica, "Jesus, who has come, is coming again, and when he comes again, those whom you have loved and lost a while, will be with him, and you will be joined with them and together with him you will live in the brightness of his presence forever." That's the Advent hope. That is that toward which Christian hope is focused.

The reason that Paul gave us the immediate paragraph of our scripture lesson is that, when a loved one died before Jesus returned, there was a fear in the hearts of family and friend that those who were dying were going to miss out. It was as though you have to keep alive and breathing until he comes, or you'll miss the grand event. Paul writes this in order to put those fears to rest.

*But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.
(I Thessalonians 4:13)*

The word for death there, sleep, was common usage. It was simply a euphemism. It is interesting that Paul does use another word for Jesus' death when he says,

*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.
(I Thessalonians 4:14)*

as though what Jesus endured, which was real death, enduring all of the consequence of all of the darkness of all of the ages, and that sense of forsakenness which he went through - Jesus died so that we would not die, but rather, fall asleep. And his point is simply this. I write in order that you won't be ignorant of these things. Those who fall asleep before he comes will not be at any disadvantage over against those who are alive and present when he appears. Paul was simply saying that whether we are alive or whether we have died, there will come a point sometime in the future when we will all be gathered into the presence of the Lord. In the 10th verse of that fifth chapter, toward the end of the passage we read,

He died for us so that we, awake or asleep, living or dead, might live in company with him.

The Advent hope is that Jesus will bring us all together again. And so, in this Advent Season, the second Sunday in Advent, let me set before you this biblical truth, which I believe is the great source of our comfort, and let me say to you that there is a communion of the saints with Jesus Christ which is not touched by death. There is a communion of the saints with Jesus Christ that is not touched by death.

Philosophers have studied the human situation, and some very profound and reflective spirits have said that the whole question of death is in the depths of our psyche, the ultimate question that we face. We all know that we will all die, and we will all, at some time or other, experience the loss, the death, of one dear to us, so death is a subject that is very urgent in the human experience. The Christian Gospel has something to say about death. What it says about death is that it is not very significant. I repeat, what it says about death is that death is not very significant.

I've not faced death, and I run a certain risk in making a statement like that. I remember when I was a student, I did a little meditation at a hymn sing after church on Sunday night. Those were the days in which I had all the answers, and didn't understand the questions. What they should have done for the good of the church was lock me up for five or six years and let me steep a bit. But I made this grand proclamation about death holding no fear for us, and I remember a very

saintly Christian lady coming up to me at the seminary that next week and saying to me, "My father was a godly man and he died a horrible death." That's all she said. That's all she needed to say, because I may have been dumb, but I'm not stupid. She said to me, "Be more sensitive when you talk about death." And so, when I say to you that what the scriptures say about death is that it is not very important, I say that knowing that I haven't faced death, knowing that some of you have, and also knowing that I have buried a father and a mother who were very dear, but both in their eighties after a full and rich life. With those qualifications, let me say again that what the Christian Gospel says about death is that it is not very important. Paul does admit that it is still the last enemy, but as I have been reflecting on that in this Advent season once again, I am struck by the Christian affirmation about the relativization of death.

There is a communion with Jesus Christ now and then, which is not affected by our death, except that our death becomes the doorway through which we move into a grander dimension of that communion. And we need to say that in our day which has been blessed by medical science and by technological breakthroughs that have enabled us to enhance life and, in many cases, prolong life. We need to say that also in a day when keeping a body alive has become a task of heroic dimensions. Death is not that important! And the prolongation of physical life in this world is not that important. There is one thing that is preeminently important, and that is that now I am in communion with God through Jesus Christ, which binds me together with all brothers and sisters who are in Christ, and which communion will not be touched but only enhanced as I move through the portal of death. I want to say that with conviction and with some compassion, even with some sensitivity.

The will to live is a God-given, wholesome, natural will and force. And the desire to enhance human life and to prolong human life, I believe, is a proper response to all that we know about the nature of life as it comes from the hand of God. But I also believe that, in a world that has become an increasingly this-worldly, one-level universe, materialistic in its goals and in its strivings, and so largely disconnected from the spiritual reality which is the depth of our being - then I need to say, also, that death is not very important! And that it is possible, by laying hold of the comfort of the Gospel and the Advent hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, to contemplate it with some equanimity and to face it with serenity.

If I stand at your bedside and you are terminally ill and you're afraid, I hope you'll be able to share that with me, and that what I am saying this morning will not add to fear or guilt because you may not be able to die easily, but nonetheless, I have to say what I am saying this morning because it is the Christian Gospel and it is true. When we lose someone we love, the loss is ours. When we are separated from one who is dear, the pain is ours. And when we weep, we are in good company because Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, when he saw the pain that death brings into the human scene. But finally if we hear the Gospel, death is not that important. It is not that big a deal. Paul says that Jesus Christ died for us so

that whether we sleep or wake, we may be in company with him. That means, whether I am dead or alive, I am in communion with him; that means whether I am dead or alive, I am alive forever more. That means that the depths of my being is fully alive and fully in tune and in touch with the Creator and Redeemer of my being, whether I am dead or alive in this present, physical, historical sense. The communion of the saints in the ancient creed spoke about that fellowship that transcends death and all ages and all places, and makes us one with all the people of God who have ever lived, all together, in the presence of God.

I have been reading a good deal about the experiences of those who have had these near-death experiences and even, frankly, some psychical material. It is most fascinating, and I am convinced that I to this point in my life have been very shortsighted, and have tapped only superficially the depth of the comfort of the Gospel that promises to us a communion and a fellowship in the body and out of the body. There is more to us than these corpuscles and molecules that make up our physical existence. And Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, will bring us together with him when all things come to their consummation, however that happens, whenever that happens. There will be a summing up of all things, and when it happens, maybe some will be alive, and most will have died, but it won't make any difference, for that communion is untouched, real life is not touched by the portals of death, which is as normal on that end as birth is on this end. This old proving ground that we're engaged in now, this earthly pilgrimage, this veil of tears, this life that some of the cynics have characterized as being "no exit," as a bad joke - all of this life which we believe is that time in which our own being is being refined and prepared for the eternal fellowship - this life will be swallowed up in life that is Life, indeed. That's the Advent hope. And those we've loved and lost awhile are close to us, and more available to us than I've ever dared to believe.

I've been thinking of my own father and mother recently and I read of a great Christian Scotsman, Ian McClaren, whose mother said to him, as she was dying, "There'll not be a day that I won't think of you, nor an hour in which I won't pray for you, and where I'm going, I'll know better what to pray for than ever before."

The communion of the saints. Why do we give up? Why do we bury someone and consider that it's all over and it's done? Why do we look for our own death sometimes with fear and trembling, when – if we really, really believed the Gospel and believed the eternal God and the promises that in communion with Him through Jesus Christ we have life in another dimension, which can only be clarified and made more grand with that movement through the limitations of time and space and bodily existence – moving through death to life, that is Life indeed.

Our Advent hope is that Jesus will bring us all together again. Our Advent hope is that nothing that is true or beautiful or good will fall away, that all of that will be gathered together and refined into the perfect kingdom of God, which is the

complete rule of God in the totality of things. And one day we'll all be together in the presence of the Lord. At the risk again of sounding superficial or naive, let me say it to you again. Death is no big deal. For Jesus is our life, whether we sleep or whether we're awake, now and forever. That is our Advent hope. Thank God he has come! Thank God he will come! Thank God he is with us now!

Let us pray. O God, these are the things that we most deeply believe. Enable us to lay hold of the Advent hope, and to live with the comfort of the Gospel, the comfort of His coming, and give us the sense, O God, of a communion and a fellowship that transcends every barrier, even death itself, making us one with all who are yours in the fellowship of Your Kingdom. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.