

Preparing for the Second Advent

Scripture: II Peter 3:11

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Evening Service

People of God: In this Christmas season, we make all kinds of preparations. We prepare our homes by putting up a Christmas tree, stringing up the Christmas lights, and perhaps having a nativity scene somewhere displayed. We prepare for family gatherings, by making travel arrangements, making a meal and writing some Christmas cards. We prepare to give gifts by writing up lists, checking for the best deals and maybe by consulting our budget. In this Christmas season, we make all kinds of preparations. But what kind of preparations do we do in the light of the Second Advent, the second coming, of the Lord?

The word “advent” literally means coming. The season of Advent was meant not merely to prepare believers for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the first coming of the Lord, the season of Advent was also intended to prepare believers for the second coming of the Lord. And so, if you look over some of the Advent hymns you see that quite a few of them deal with the return of Christ.

This year our morning advent series focused on the first coming of Jesus, asking who really was Jesus. It seems to me that given how our culture has stolen Christmas from the Christian church and adapted it to its own purposes, it is very important for the church to mark Advent and to keep Christ at the center of attention. We can also do that by being reminded that Jesus will come again.

Historically, this emphasis on the second coming has been the more dominant theme in Advent than in preparing for the first coming of Jesus. Tonight we acknowledge that advent yearning for the return of Christ by dealing with this third chapter of II Peter, focusing on the question of verse 11: In the light of Christ’s return, what kind of people ought we to be?

In this chapter, Peter reminds believers that Jesus Christ will come again. He states that in opposition to the scoffers who questioned whether

Jesus would indeed return. Already in the first century of the church there will those who mocked this teaching that Christ would come back. Their mocking cry went up: “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”

After two thousand years, this question becomes even more pressing. It’s been a long time since Christ ascended into heaven. A very long time. Generation after generation has come and gone. Life and death, summer and winter, everything continues along without any end in sight. The promise of Christ’s return falls into background. Even most believers don’t live in that expectation that he could return at any time.

But Peter reminds those scoffers that Jesus Christ will indeed return. He offers them two points to consider. First of all, he reminds them of God’s judgment upon humanity through the flood at the time of Noah. Just as God destroyed the world with the flood so he will destroy the heavens and the earth with fire. This judgment is, of course, part of Christ’s return. As God was true to his word in the past, so he will true to his word in the future. Judgment will come.

Second, Peter reminds them that God’s sense of timing is not our sense of timing: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, a thousand years are like a day. In other words, God works on a different time schedule than humanity. What appears to us to be slow may actually be quick in the scheme of eternity. Besides Peter says, this so called delay in Christ’s return is really an indication of God’s patience with humanity and with his plan so that many people will hear and respond to the gospel in faith.

And so we are reminded of the certainty of Christ’s return. Just as the flood happened thousands of years before the birth of Christ, who’s to say his return may not take thousands of years after his ascension? But as the flood happened so too will the final judgment. In the meantime, the gospel can be proclaimed.

And so our advent hope for Christ’s return remains. But Peter also warns that we do not when this will happen: But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. Earlier this year we reflected upon this aspect of Christ’s return because of the predictions of Harold Camping. Camping, a former CRC member, gained headline news with his prediction that Christ would return on May 21. When that didn’t happen, he revised his calculations, saying that May 21 was just the spiritual judgment and named October 21 as the end of the universe. Of course, that date has come and gone as well and the world is still here. Camping, by now, has been totally disgraced and his followers are disillusioned.

Camping and his followers should have listened to the words of Scripture, including these words of Peter. We don't know when Christ will return. Like a thief in the night, he will return when we don't expect it. But the fact is, Christ will return one day. A return that will involve the judgment of humanity and the destruction of this present world. Unfortunately, these false predictions—and Camping isn't alone in making predictions—all of that discredits the message of the church about the Second Advent—the Second Coming—of Christ. And it takes away from what ought to be the concern in dealing with Christ's return.

For Peter, the certainty of Christ's return leads to the question of verse 11: What kind of people ought you to be? The answer: You ought to live holy and godly lives.

This question and especially its answer isn't what we might expect when dealing the return of Christ. Peter does not say we should be fixated on the return of Christ, trying to figure out exactly when this might happen. He has already ruled out predictions.

Nor does he say: We ought to try to escape this world, or to flee from the concerns of this world. That's sometimes has been the Christians' response to the issues and problems of the world: Don't get too worked up about it, because in the end, the world will just be destroyed. Why should Christians care about the environment when it's all going to be replaced? Why get entangled in social justice issues, when the final judgment will sort all of that out?

Peter's answer here rejects that kind of thinking. He doesn't encourage believers to withdraw from the world or to ignore the issues of our time.

Surprisingly, Peter also doesn't say: Since Christ will return at any time, you had better be engaged in evangelism. You had better make sure your neighbors have been saved. Yet that is often how an end-time focus is stated in the church today. Very often the prospect of Christ's return is used to make sure you know that you are saved, let alone your neighbor.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying we should not be engaged in evangelism. We do. Nor do I deny that the return of Christ and the final judgment ought to give us some incentive to be more active in this area. It does. But interestingly, that's not Peter's answer here. He doesn't say: Since Christ can come back any time you had better use that as a scare tactic to get people to believe. Instead, his answer to the question: what kind of people ought you to be? Is this: You ought to live holy and godly lives. That's an unexpected answer.

Unexpected, perhaps, because of the way end time thinking has been distorted by people like Harold Camping. But in the Bible, the return of Christ leads to leading a Christ-like life. It leads to ethical behavior. In the words of Peter, it leads to a holy and godly life.

Peter is not unique in this regard. Jesus in Matthew 25 offers three parables that deal with his return. In the first one, the Parable of the Ten Virgins, calls us to keep watch because we do not know the hour of his coming. Then in the second parable, the Parable of the Talents, Jesus encourages his followers to put their gifts and abilities to work in promoting the Master's business. In other words, we are called to seek after the kingdom of God. Then in the third parable, the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus makes his judgment based on how people treated the hungry, the sick, the naked and the prisoner. And so, Jesus' parables about his return impact how we ought to live in the present.

Peter, here, doesn't use a parable to make that point. His answer is more straightforward. Live a holy and godly life. There isn't much to distinguish between the words "holy" and "godly". They describe the same thing and re-enforce each other. To be holy is to be set apart from the ways of the sinful world and to live for God. To be godly is to live a life in accordance with the will of God.

As God's people, we're not left in the dark as to the content of this holy and godly life. The whole of Scripture speaks of it. We have the summary in the Ten Commandments. We have Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. We have in nearly every NT letter passages that describe the Christian way of life. We're not ignorant of what it means to live a holy and godly life.

But this is our calling in the light of Christ's return. This is how we prepare for his second advent. By being the people he has enabled us to be. Through his death and resurrection, we have been given new life. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we can live out that new life—as individuals and as a body of believers. And what Christ wants from us is to be faithful to him. To find us working for him. To live out what it means to be his disciples. To live holy and godly lives.

Now Peter adds something to this that really surprises us: You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. And "speed its coming"? Is that possible? Can we hasten the return of the Lord? That seems to go against our emphasis that the return of Jesus is entirely in the hands of God. Do we have something to do with it?

It turns out we do. Is it really that surprising? After all, doesn't God hear our prayers? And don't we pray that final prayer of Scripture: Come,

Lord Jesus, come soon? Don't we pray: Your Kingdom come? Doesn't God take these prayers into account? Doesn't God also then take into account our action and our lives? In his sovereignty, he does.

And so, the season of advent calls us to prepare not just for Christmas Day, but for Christ's second coming. And that preparation involves lives that are holy and godly. And that's not really different from how God's people were to prepare for Christ's first coming. After all, what was the message of John the Baptist? His was a message of repentance, a message of changed lives. And so our advent preparations need to go beyond decorating our homes, preparing a large family meal, or shopping for gifts. The most essential preparation is to live a holy and godly life. Amen.