

People Get Ready
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Advent 1C
Luke 21:25-36

Well, here we are, gathered for worship on the last Sunday of November. You may still have some leftover turkey and cranberry sauce in your fridge, but Thanksgiving is officially over. And you and your credit card may still be recovering, but Black Friday is officially over, too. Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a four-week season of waiting and watching for the coming of Christ. In fact, that's what the word *advent* means—"coming"—and when we use it in the church we use it to refer to both the first and second coming of Christ.

His first coming was more than 2,000 years ago, when he came as a helpless baby, born in a stable and laid in a manger in Bethlehem. That's the story we will tell at Christmas, and most of us will spend the next four weeks getting ready for the celebration of that first coming. But in the weeks that follow we will tell the stories of what happened when that baby grew up, how he taught and preached and healed, how he was arrested, tried, and crucified, how he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, but not before telling his disciples he would come again someday. From that day until this one his followers have been watching and waiting for his second coming. But 2,000 years is a long time, and if the truth be told, there are probably not many churchgoers who are still watching and waiting, at least not with any real expectation of his coming. Our waiting has taken on a kind of ceremonial quality. We've turned it into an advent pageant.

But that's not how it was in the early days.

The earliest document to end up in the New Testament is the letter we call 1 Thessalonians. Scholars agree that it was written somewhere around the year 51—just a little less than twenty years after the death of Jesus—at a time when Paul, at least, believed that he might come back at any minute. In the opening verses of that letter Paul talks about how the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve a living and true God, and how they now wait for his Son from Heaven (1:9-10). In chapter 4 he talks about Christ's second coming and says, "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died." In other words, Paul believed that Christ would come within his lifetime. He believed that "the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet," would descend from heaven, and that the dead in Christ would rise first and then those who were alive, who were left, would be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air." He told the Thessalonians to comfort one another with these words.

I have to confess, those words have not always been that comforting to me. In my teenage years I visited a Pentecostal church where they really did seem to be watching and waiting for the return of Christ. They talked about it all the time. These were poor mountain people, and what I've learned through the years is that it is often those people who are on the fringes of society who find the most comfort in the Second Coming. They believe that one of these days the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and on that day the wheel will turn, the revolution will begin: the high and mighty will be brought down, and the low and lowly will be lifted up. But I was just a teenager. There were so many things I wanted to see and do. I didn't want Jesus to come back too soon.

I heard a lot about the Second Coming in that little Pentecostal church but then I went off to St. Andrews Presbyterian College where I didn't hear much about it at all. And then one spring day I found myself thinking about it again, and I'll tell you why. The dining hall at St. Andrews faced west, and one whole wall was windows looking out over a lake. At certain times of the year the sun would be setting during dinner, and the sunsets were often spectacular. But on this day the sun went down without calling attention to itself, and it began to get dark outside, and then in a way that everybody seemed to notice, it began to get light again. We stopped eating and talking. We started looking out the window where the sky was getting noticeably lighter and brighter. It began to fill with color—with purples and oranges and reds, with blues and greens and yellows, and then beams of sunlight broke through the clouds until the whole thing began to look like a psychedelic painting. I stepped outside to get a better look and I remember that it was absolutely quiet out there, as if the whole world were holding its breath. I began to get an eerie feeling that something was about to happen, something big, and then I heard it—the blast of a trumpet—and my heart almost stopped beating. I thought Jesus was coming back right then.

It turned out to be nothing but a beautiful sunset. That temporary darkness was caused by a low lying band of clouds that blocked the sun for a little while before it broke through from underneath. And that blast I heard was some freshman blowing his trumpet on the fire escape of his dormitory. But maybe he did it because he had gone to the same kind of church I had. Maybe he, too, thought that Jesus was coming back. And maybe like me he was terrified at the prospect. I was, after all, a college student. You know how they are. If Jesus was coming back I had a whole lot of confessing and repenting to

do. I wasn't even close to being ready. Which may be why Jesus says what he does in today's Gospel lesson. "Be alert!" But after 2,000 years some of us have gotten distracted and bored. Why should we keep waiting and watching for someone who doesn't seem to be coming?

I've been thinking about that lately, and I've wondered especially what would change if we decided that Jesus was never coming back. At the very least we would have to acknowledge that this is it, this is as good as it's going to get, and if it's going to get any better it will be entirely up to us. That's not the worst thing I can imagine, and frankly it might be a good thing if some people stopped scanning the skies for the Second Coming and got busy making the world a better place. But if I spend any time with that idea I realize that there are some things we will never be able to fix, some things only God can do, and if Jesus isn't coming back we're sunk. I can help to pick up the trash in our downtown park, for example, but I can't help that guy sitting on the bench get over his alcoholism, I can't help him get his wife back or his life back. And I can't keep people from hating and hurting each other, I can't stop people from starting wars. I can't end a pandemic, I can't prevent death, I can't fix a broken heart.

There are some things only God can do.

I think that's what Jesus is trying to teach us in this passage from Luke 21. If you read the whole thing you will see that it's not all that encouraging. He seems to be saying that things are going to get a whole lot worse before they get better. But at the beginning of today's reading he says, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the

powers of the heavens will be shaken.” But it’s then, right then, when it looks like the world is coming to an end that we will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. It sounds a little scary, but what Jesus is saying is that when things get so bad they can’t get any worse that’s when they will get suddenly better, that’s when he will come to save those who are his. “Stand up and raise your heads,” he says, “because your redemption is drawing near.” And that’s why you would want to be alert, so that when he rang your doorbell in the middle of the night you would be there, sitting on the couch, waiting to greet him.

That almost happened to me once. My daughter Ellie was coming in from New York. I knew she was coming and I was eager to see her, but her bus was running a little late and I’d been up since 5:30 that morning and I got to the place where I just couldn’t keep my eyes open. I tried. I sat in that chair near the door with my head nodding and my eyelids sliding down. But eventually I excused myself and went to bed, I fell asleep, and I missed that thrilling moment when my daughter came home. I could have kicked myself. “Be alert,” Jesus says. “Stay awake.” Not because something terrible is about to happen but because something wonderful is about to happen—the one who loved you enough to die for you is coming back, and he wants to know if you love him enough to keep your eyes open. Can you imagine what we would miss if we gave up on him, and just decided he was never coming back?

I saw this in a movie once. It was “Castaway,” with Tom Hanks, where he plays a Fed Ex executive named Chuck who ends up on a deserted island for four years. In all that time he is pining away for his fiancée, the one he kissed goodbye on the night he boarded the ill-fated plane that went down in the South Pacific. He looks at her picture

until her picture is faded and gone, and then he draws a picture of her on the wall of the cave where he lives. He has almost given up hope when something washes up on the shore of his island that he can use as a sail to get him back to civilization. When he gets back to Memphis he learns that Kelly, his fiancée, has married someone else. As she explains it to him later they spent months searching and finally gave up hope that he was ever coming back. They had his funeral. And sometime after that, just because he wouldn't stop asking her, she went out with that nice dentist, and sometime after that they got married. Chuck can hardly believe it. He loved her so much, and she loved him so much. They were going to spend the rest of their lives together, they were going to live happily ever after, but she became convinced that he was never coming back. And so it wasn't a happy reunion he came home to, but the greatest grief of his life.

Compare that with the story I found in my devotional reading last week. It was an excerpt from a book called *The God Who Comes*, by Carlo Carretto. The language is a little old fashioned but maybe you can get the gist of it anyway. He writes: "When her husband is near, and does not let her want for anything she expects, hopes for, and enjoys, a wife says she loves her husband, says it easily and normally. But when the husband is far away, when the waiting is prolonged for months and years, when doubt grows that he will ever return again, oh, then the true test of love begins! What light, what splendors, in the possibilities this wife has to resist, while she fixes her eyes on the anonymous crowd and tries to pick out him, only him! What power of real, living, strong testimony emanates from the faithful vigilance, the unquenchable hope, which this woman lives behind the bitter doorway of waiting! Oh, how each one of us would like to be the bridegroom who returns disguised as a poor stranger, whom she does not

recognize, but to whom she repeats, again and again, her certainty of his return and the sweetness of his love!”ⁱ

Do you see? If only Kelly had been that woman. If only she had been so convinced that Chuck would return that when he did come back after four endless years on that desert island, he would find her waiting for him. But that’s not what happened. She gave up. She lost hope. She married another man. I know it’s been 2,000 years since Jesus came the first time. I know there are plenty of good reasons for doubting he will ever come again. But what if he does, and what if he finds you waiting for him? What would it mean to him to know that you never gave up? I don’t want to give up. I know there are things in this world I cannot fix, things that only God can do. And when we live through a time like the time we have lived through recently, I begin to lift up my head, I begin to look for the coming of the Son of Man, I begin to believe that maybe things have gotten so bad...

...they’re about to get better.

—*Jim Somerville, 2021*

ⁱ From *A Guide to Prayer*, by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), p. 18.