



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Happy New Year—But Wait, There’s *More!*” Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37 First Sunday of Advent

Happy New Year! Yes, today is New Year’s Day, according to the ancient Church Calendar, for this is the First Sunday in Advent, which is the start of the yearly cycle for Christians. With the start of this Season of Advent’s four Sundays, we begin to walk with Jesus, to know him better and love him more, and to obey him in our congregation and beyond. Today is a new start, and I hope it helps us keep Christ in Christmas. Come tonight for the “Hanging of the Greens”, and we’ll make this place glow with the anticipation of Christmas!

Each year on the First Sunday of Advent, the Bible texts that are prescribed relate to the Return—or Second Coming/SECOND ADVENT—of Christ, and that’s true today, also. It may seem odd that texts about THE END are followed by texts about Jesus’ Beginning—the Nativity stories and prophecies of Christ’s birth. Both are “new beginnings”

The Second Coming is about hope—and we can say the same about Advent as a season overall. It’s all about hope. Hope matters. We live by hope. Hope-less people die so much sooner, and have a poor quality of life while they’re living. Hopelessness says, “All my tomorrows will be the same as my yesterdays.” Peggy Lee made famous a song, “Is That All There Is?,” which is a song of boredom and hopelessness. Life for hopeless people feels like a prison cell. Depression is another name for hopelessness, isn’t it? “Hope deferred,” the Bible tells us, “makes the heart sick; but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.” (Proverbs 13:12)

Depression is especially painful for people around the holidays—this time of year. More so in years without economic recession, holidays bring—even, demand--an expectation of joy and fun and family; and if reality doesn’t measure up, we can feel let down, disappointed. If we’ve lost someone close to us to death or divorce in the last year or so--or to Alzheimer’s or some other debilitating illness—the Thanksgiving-through-Christmas time can feel awful. Lost a job? Especially for men who have been programmed to be “the family provider”, all the ads for Christmas STUFF seem to rub your face in failure. Holidays can be a rough time, sucking away hope.

After Senator Barak Obama wrote his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, it’s no mystery why he drew so much attention, even before he announced his candidacy for President of the United States. People are hungry for hope—always--and especially in difficult times.

So please understand, The Second Coming of Christ is about hope, the return of the One we love. That’s what our texts tell us today. Open your Bibles first to the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, and find chapter 64. That’s just a little past half-way in your Bible. The section we’ll read this morning is part of a longer complaint the Prophet makes to God, on behalf of the people who have been suffering in exile in Babylon. God has been so out of the picture, the Prophet says, that virtually no one remembers the times when God seemed to show up on Israel’s side. Listen for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read chapter 64, verses 1-9. *[text]*

The Prophet is appealing to God's better nature, as it were, asking that the waiting be ended, and that God tear open the heavens that, year after year, have seemed like a concrete ceiling made praying an exercise in futility. He asks that God tear the barrier open, as one tears up an old curtain, and show up decisively for His people, even though they clearly do not deserve such a grace. In this text, our relationship with God has a life that is not snuffed out by our selfish ways. Thanks be to God!

With all the trouble in the world right now, can't you identify a bit with the Prophet's distress, his desperation borne of delay, as he beats on God's door to get God to respond? And those of us who deal with our own depression, we know this feeling of being abandoned by God, don't we? It's good to know that we are not the first and only ones who have ever felt that way. Indeed, maybe we can stand in our home and yell out this prayer to God *with the Prophet* ---and then, listen!

Our middle text is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. This is near the start of his First letter, and it's one of those thanksgiving passages we expect to find at the early point of his letters. But listen to the specifics here—notice the things for which Paul is grateful, the things he identifies as the forward-looking hope for his people. Here comes God's Word, from First Corinthians 1:3-9. *[text]*

Here again, the return of Christ brings hope. Things will be made right. Jesus will show his resurrection body—and important issue for the Corinthians. And Paul is grateful that they are staying strong and eager for the Lord's return. They are being (largely) faithful, and God is surely faithful.

Our final text today is part of "The Little Apocalypse" in Mark's Gospel, chapter 13, starting in verse 24. Turn there, will you? Here Jesus talks about what his return will be like. Listen for the terror and hope—the decisive difference the return of our Lord of Love will make. *[text]*

There are vivid images here, with all creation drawn into a final terrible conflict as Jesus returns to claim his throne as King! This is a common pattern in Scripture, as if there are three levels of reality—a spiritual realm, a theater upon the earth, and creation itself. Jesus is saying, everything will rock and roll on that Day. Be ready. Keep your eyes peeled. When you see chaos breaking out and danger on every side, you will know what's going on, and you will not be paralyzed in fear. On the other side of this chaos, you will be with me again, he says. Look up!

Do you hope to see your loved ones again? You will—all of you who know and love Jesus. But more than anyone we have ever known, it will be Jesus himself--only-begotten son of the Father--whom we will love more than anyone. Meeting him face-to-face will make any other love in our life fade into the background. In the book of Revelation, John has a vision in which he is awed by the vast reaches of heaven, and he's clearly in love with Jesus, the Lamb. So it will be for you and for me.

The Second Coming of Christ is all about hope. This is really good news, even though for many it will be bad news. This is really good news for those who love Jesus.

Imagine, if you will, a young boy had just lost his mother in a car accident, and today his father--an international merchant who traveled most of every week for his work--told his son that

he was going to put him in a boys' home so he could be looked after. He reassured his son that it was only for a while. As the little boy and his father stood just inside the doors of the state boys' home, his father said to him: "I must leave you for a while, but I want you to remember that I love you. I know that you will be lonely, scared, and feel like giving up on me." As the little boy's father looked into his son's tear-filled eyes he said, "I want you to know that one day I will come back and take you home, I promise." After giving his son a hug, he turned and walked out of the two black doors that closed behind him with a loud bang that echoed through the halls and right into the little boy's heart. He felt as if he had lost everything--first, his mom, and now, his dad. But he remembered the promise his father had made to him, "I will come someday to take you home."

Each day between classes the little boy journeyed down the long hallway to sit in the large window-seat to look for his father. The days turned into weeks, the weeks into months into a year. With each trip down that hallway he walked a little slower. Then came the day that marked a year since his father had walked out those black double doors. The little boy decided that this would be his last trip down the long hallway if his father didn't come back today. Today, he was giving up. So he began his walk, and he began to cry, and as he did so, he could see each tear fall and splash onto the cold tile floor. He reached the window-seat, and he looked out the window in hopes of seeing his father but all he saw was a concrete sidewalk that seemed to go on forever. Once again it was time for him to return to his class. He dragged himself off the window-seat and began to walk away. But something inside the boy's heart urged him to turn and look just one last time. Walking back to the window he pressed his tearstained cheek against the window.

He looked to the left and saw once again the endless concrete sidewalk. He looked to the right and there was a figure walking down the sidewalk. The little boy looked as the figure came more into view with each step. The little boy's heart began to beat faster with anticipation. He walked out the black double doors and stood on the sidewalk focusing on this approaching figure. He began to walk toward the person, his heart rate increasing with every step. The closer he got, the more clearly he could see that indeed, it was his father. With great joy the little boy began to run as fast as his legs would carry him. He could see his father walking toward him with his arms open wide to pick him up. The little boy ran and jumped into his father's arms. His father wrapped his arms around his son and said to him, "I know that you were lonely, and thought that I had forgotten you and maybe even that I didn't love you. But I do love you and I have come to take you home."

The little boy lost, and then had restored, the love of his father. This boy's longing for his "Daddy" (that's what Jesus called God) is a picture of love. The joy of the father's return is directly in proportion to the love the little boy kept alive, which was not easy. So if you don't care much about the return of Jesus, what does that suggest about your level of love for him? Is your connection with Jesus a "belief", or a relationship? Is it about a "transaction" when you bought "fire insurance"? Or, have you fallen in love with the "insurance agent"? When the fire comes, will you be looking for your paper policy, or will you be looking for the Person of Jesus? The Second Coming of Christ is good news for those who love Jesus.

Jesus had a warning in his words about his Return. There will be false messiahs, he said. He said there would be false hopes raised from time to time. How can we avoid being taken in by counterfeit Christs? The answer is, we have to know Jesus well enough to distinguish between him and others who make false claims. Do we know his voice, so we can follow him?

Have you “heard” Jesus’ voice, by the Holy Spirit in the Written Word, by memory, intuition, emotion, through other people?

While we wait and look up, wouldn't this be a great time to get to know him, a little bit more each day? Please, people—love Jesus more so you will want to spend time with him to love Jesus more.

The Second Coming of Christ is about waiting in hope, and waiting in hope together. The “you's” in so much of Scripture are plural, not singular. There IS more! And it will come to those who know Jesus so well that they recognize his voice, and obey him as The Good Shepherd.

While we live and wait for our Lord, we are to keep each other's faith and hope alive through the love we share with each other. Jesus has given us together his Holy Spirit, so that we may encourage each other to be ready for Him, as if tomorrow might be the day. He gave us (together, not individually) His Holy Spirit to comfort and counsel us, and help us remember him as our First Love. We don't have to wait in a vacuum, all alone. Together, Paul tells us, we with all the Christians of the world are the very Body of Christ. Christ is coming for the Great Wedding Banquet, and together we are his Bride.

Do you love Jesus like a bride loves her bridegroom—eagerly waiting for the wedding ceremony to begin, clutching her flowers in anticipation of seeing her Beloved, and enjoying his love at last?

How would Jesus know we love him? Well, do we obey his commands? Do we make disciples as we go, showing them by our example how to obey his commands and make their own disciples?

For many of us, the word “obey” sticks in our throats. To “obey”, for many of us, feels like we are being compelled to take on some oppressive obligation. But let me re-frame what it means to obey Jesus' commands.

When Sharon asks me to do something, I usually try to do it. But the funny thing is, I don't think of it as “obeying”. I do it as a gift of love to her. Same with Jesus. I make disciples and raise them to maturity as Jesus told us, but I don't think of it as “obeying”—though that's what it is. This is my gift to him, the One who died for me before I knew “up from down”. When I obey him, I find I am joining him in his work. I get to be with Jesus now. I see Jesus show up when someone “gets it” about God, and I cheer as I see the lights go on, and a life change.

There IS more—and it's ALL JESUS! Why not get started on loving him now, enjoying him now, obeying him now? You don't have to wait for some “end time”. Give him gifts every day. Think of him every day. Hear his voice. Love his people. Extend his love to all by joining him in what he is doing. And you get Jesus, too!

There IS more to life than the life most people live! It's “eternal life, now”. It's life with Jesus as the Holy Spirit connects us, now.

Ann Weems writes about Christ's Return this way:

Our God is the One who comes to us
in a burning bush,
in an angel's song,
in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found
locked in the church,
not even in the sanctuary

Our God will be where God will be
without constraints,
no predictability

Our God lives where our God lives
and destruction has no power
and even death cannot stop
the living

Our God will be born where God will be born,
but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.

When God is ready
God will come
even to a godforsaken place
like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch . . .
for you know not when
God comes.

Watch, that you might be found
whenever
wherever
God comes.

(“The Coming of God” one-time use by permission of the author,
from her collection, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Westminster/John Knox Press)

Happy New Year!
Happy New Life!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on November 30, 2008 by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]