



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone*

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## “What Time Is It?”

### Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 First Sunday in ADVENT – “Hanging of the Greens” tonight!

*It's beginning to look a lot like Advent, ev'ry-where you go . . .*

Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, I got some groceries we needed and went looking for something at the CVS store. As I was walking around, it suddenly occurred to me that they were playing Christmas music on the sound system. I saw a young clerk putting up boxes of Christ-mas cards on the shelves, as fast as she could. New little plush animals were stuffed in a bin, and each one was decorated with Christmas colors in clothing and ribbons. I suppose someone from another planet could be forgiven for thinking that Christmas was this week. What time IS it?

Time is a tricky thing. We have Daylight Savings Time, and then we don't. We have time zones across the globe, and we'd better calculate the difference in time correctly, or we might wake someone out of a sound sleep when we call their home, far away. What time IS it?

In the Bible, time is also tricky. You've heard the joke about the man who asked God how long a million years was to Him. God replied, "It's just like a single second of your time, my child." So the man asked, "And what about a million dollars?" The Lord replied, "To me, it's just like a single penny." So the man gathered himself up and said, "Well, Lord, could I have one of your pennies?" And God said, "Certainly, my child, just a second."

In New Testament Greek, two words for “time” stand out. One is “kronos”, and the other is “kairos”. “Kronos” means, *measurable units of time, passing in sequence*—you know, chrono-logically. The other major word for “time” is “kairos”, and “kairos” means *a moment of great significance*. On the one hand, September 11, 2001 was a date like any other—in “kronos” time. But when you say it as “nine-eleven”, suddenly it's “kairos”—a date freighted with significance, a time that propelled President Bush to launch a war on terror that has carried U.S. troops to Af-ghanistan and Iraq, and cost thousands of lives of Americans and far more deaths of Afghanis and Iraqis. “9-11” was the reason given to create the TSA that makes us take off our shoes at airport screenings. “9-11” justified spending any amount of money to combat an elusive threat, raising the Federal budget deficit that we will pay for, for a long time to come. “9/11” is “kairos”. So when we read the Bible, we have to ask, what kind of time are they using, “kronos” or “kairos”? What time IS it?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the first season of what is called “the church year”, and it divides the year into meaningful “kairos” units that follow the life of Jesus and the Church. That's right—for Christians, New Year's Eve comes 4 weeks before Christmas! Talk about time confusion!

The word “advent” means, “coming”—as in, “coming attractions”. An adventure, for ex-ample, is an exciting journey with terror and surprises, often a test of the hero character, with the reward of

wisdom and riches or other benefits secured by completing the journey successfully. “Advent” is in “adventure”, and it carries some of that same sense of expectancy.

Usually we think of Advent as preparation for the coming, or arrival, of the Savior, Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Messiah/Christ. And Advent IS that. But on this first Sunday of Advent, the church always reads Bible texts the focus on Christ’s “Second Advent”, his return, the goal to which all creation is moving, when God will make things radically right. That’s where we are this morning.

The texts come from Jeremiah, from Luke, and from First Thessalonians. Jeremiah 33, verses 14-16 bring us a message of hope—and hope is certainly one of the themes of Advent, as we heard today in the Advent Wreath presentation. Listen for God’s message of hope TO US, this morning. *[text]*

Our second text is “the little apocalypse” from Luke’s record, in chapter 21, verses 25-36. Listen again for God’s voice. *[text]*

The third text today comes from Paul’s First Letter to the Christians at Thessalonica, chapter 3, verses 9-13. Listen for Paul’s love for these people, his frustration at the distance be-tween them, and his desire that they hold on in hope, and be ready for the return of our Re-deemer. *[text]*

The Second Coming gives us a picture of God’s tolerance for evil at an end. God sends His Son (Christ the Victor) to lead the final battle that defeats Satan and evil; he judges the living and the dead, and clears the earth for God to bring to the earth a new creation. Those who have been obeying God get to be part of that new creation; those who have not obeyed God will lose out. The latest prediction for the end is 2012, based on a piece of Mayan calendar lore, if you can believe it.

Have you ever looked at a clock in the room when you’re watching TV? Maybe you’re watching a murder mystery, and one of the “good guys” has been kidnapped by a serial killer. It looks really bad. Will the rest of the police squad find their friend in time? I sometimes have caught myself looking at the clock in order to gauge how much time the good guys have to get there—I suppose it’s a way to manage my suspense, because the show has to end with a rescue, right?! It’s nice when you can figure out such things; you know when it will be “over”.

But real life isn’t like that. Ask anyone who has been oppressed, living in fear. In the midst of captivity, you don’t know when—or if—it will ever end. How do you live with such uncertainty, with so little control of your life?

The tumultuous early years of the church were like that. Both Jews and Christians were being persecuted, and life was interminably uncertain, filled with financial, social, physical and emotional pain. Such ongoing pressure and pain grinds you down; every day is full of stress and worry, and that’s all you can reasonably expect. So this message of the imminent Return of Christ brought hope to these suffering people. When God tells you this state of things will not go on forever, that is the sound of hope. When God tells you evil will not triumph in the end, a bit of light flickers into your dark dungeon. That evil is on the throne now—well, that’s to be expected; following God has rarely been easy—just look at the record (Bible). What counts is being faithful, holding fast to the end.

You can see, can’t you, how such a message of Christ’s return gives hope to people on the bottom of the pile? It has enabled Christians to suffer and endure so much over the dark times. “*Faith of our fathers, living still--in spite of dungeon, fire and sword...*” But what about during “average” times? And what about when things are actually going *well*?

The message is the same. But for people like us who are relatively free of these terrible burdens many of our Christian ancestors bore, our challenge is different. Instead of fighting against active evil, we find we are fighting against our own inertia.

The Great Commandment—Love the Lord Your God with everything you've got, and love especially your needy neighbor as yourself—and the Great Commission—go, make disciples, baptize, teach them to obey Jesus' words—these two “prime directives” still address those of us who are getting by OK: Are we obeying Jesus? You see, if we are not loving God and our neighbor, if we are not connecting people to Jesus in such a way that they live for connecting others to Jesus, too, then we are in rebellion against God. By avoiding, denying, or neglecting making disciples, we show we hate Jesus. We have no care for his words to us. We are showing, “Jesus is not my Lord.” We are not Christians.

Is that how Jesus will catch us when he comes again, at a time we do not expect? Yes, or no?

Hmm! This Second Coming of Christ—preached every year on this Sunday in Lection-ary churches around the world—is a crucial moment for us, believers whose lives are going well. The first Sunday of Advent is rather like “New Year's Day for Christians”. It's the start of a new “church year”. And just as we can take advantage of turning the page of our calendars into a new calendar year and reflect on what the new year might bring—a “kronos” moment--so Christians can use the theme on this Sunday to examine ourselves to see if we are ready to meet our Redeemer, and to decide how important that is going to be for us. That's thinking ahead in “kairos” time.

Why would we do that? Why would we obey Jesus? Is it from fear—fear of rejection by Jesus the Judge? Or is it out of love for God, a desire deep enough to “thanks-live” and not just “thanks-give”? Fear is the stronger emotion—it's a hard-wired survival mechanism; our limbic system kicks in with “fight or flight”. Love, by comparison, is a luxury. Little effort is required to maintain fear; it's an automatic response to threats in our environment. Love, however, as anyone who is married knows, requires effort from us to keep it alive and active. While love also may be a response to our environment—an experience of being loved by God--that re-sponse starts with a decision and endures with many decisions along the way. So the First Sunday in Advent is a check on our decision-making. Have we gotten lazy? Do we really love God, or is it all just lip-service, one more way of “being a good boy”, or “a good girl”?

What do we WANT it to be in “this new year”?

And once you’ve decided to act on your love for God by obeying Jesus’ commands, how would you do it? How would you start to make disciples? Actually, I’ve got you covered. In this month’s issue of our *Chronicles* newsletter, I give you a bunch of ideas--and I know you can adapt and improve on what I suggest there, and you can soon read it on-line. There are ways to turn conversations toward God. This season, for all we complain about its commercialization, gives us an easy reason. WE SHOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS OPPORTUNITY!! Use “Christmas”! It’s a God-given opportunity, and we should grab it.

Tonight we have our “Hanging of the Greens”, with finger-foods we bring to pass around. Invite a neighbor to help us decorate the worship center, to eat, and to sing carols. In-troduce them to a number of our people, and let new friendships begin here tonight.

Invite someone without a church home to come with you for our Christmas event, De-cember 13<sup>th</sup>, with our choir and musicians leading us to celebrate the coming of God’s Light into our dark world. Put on a post-Christmas dinner party, and invite Christians and non-Christians alike to help YOU celebrate YOUR love for God, rekindled in this season.

There are all kinds of ways to start making disciples in this season. What will you do with these natural opportunities to make new friendships, and share God’s love? How will you bless others with the blessings God has given you?

Happy New Year. Have this kind of “kairos” new year, and you’ll have a very merry Christmas!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on November 29, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]