



The Second Coming

An Advent sermon by Interim Pastor Tom Ford

Matthew 24:

[36] "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

[37] As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man.

[38] For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark,

[39] and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man.

[40] Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left.

[41] Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left.

[42] Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

[43] But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was

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coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into.
[44] Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

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Grace to you, and peace, from God Our Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ.

Every Advent I am compelled to return to the greatest Advent sermon I have ever heard. I want to share it with you, but I must warn you, it is very short and if your mind wanders, you will miss it. Are you ready?

AN ADVENT MINI-SERMON
by the famous preacher of 13th Century, Peter of Blois

There are three Comings of Our Lord: the First, in the Flesh; the Second, in the Soul; the Third, at the Judgment. His First was humble and hidden. His Second is mysterious and filled with love. His Third will be majestic and terrible. In his First, a Lamb; in his Last, a Lion; in the One-In-Between-The-Two, The Tenderest of Friends.

That's it.

I was taught when I was growing up that the Second Coming was at the end of time. The First was in Bethlehem. Nothing was ever said about three comings. I did hear a lot about having Jesus in your heart, but it was rarely called a coming. The one exception I can remember, the hymn with the refrain, "O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee." But that was to be expected, if you wanted to be a Christian. No one ever referred to it, though, as the Second Coming.

The Second Coming was, Grandma Ford told me quite early, when the Lord would return at the end of time. It was reinforced in church each week when we recited the Creed: "He will come again to judge the quick and the dead."

Now, I don't know about you, but when I was growing up in the American South, people took this understanding of the Second Coming very seriously and very literally. One such person was my paternal grandmother Ford. She had a book of Bible illustrations, which I still have, that provides graphic depictions of what the end of the world will look like. When these were shown to me when I was 4 and 5 years old, they made quite an impression! Legions of angels

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accompanying Jesus as the Judge, people coming out of graves, people in utter shock and terror. Judgement Day! You better be ready!

Grandma also believed that any thunderstorm was the possible beginning of the end and she absolutely forbade me to act in any rowdy or boisterous way or even to sing while a thunderstorm was going on. The thunderstorm was to have your complete, undivided, quiet reverential attention! We never know when the Lord will return, she said, but we have to be ready.

Now, at first, I took this quite literally. And had actual anxiety. Could this thunderstorm be the beginning of the Lord's return?

But, after I grew a little older and sat silently through quite a few thunderstorms, and the Lord never returned, I began to wonder. Then I eventually found out that a lot of other people had also been wondering, including the writer of the 2nd Epistle of St. Peter.

The Second Letter of Peter, which is seen by many scholars as the last document to be written in the New Testament, perhaps written as late as 150 A.D., acknowledges that Jesus had not yet come back to earth and that this could make the church look bad. The letter affirms that "Scoffers will come...saying 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'" This biblical author has an explanation, though: "Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."

Of course, the expectation of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God has continued throughout the two thousand-year history of the church. Church fathers like Tertullian argued for the end being near in the early 200's. The belief became particularly intense at the close of the first millennium in 1,000 A.D., again at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's, and then during the 1800's among a number of Protestant movements. Even in our own time, many thought the kingdom would come with the turn of the new millennium. The expectation has continued since in apocalyptic visions held not only by certain clergy but by lots of lay people, including some prominent politicians. According to a recent survey in U.S. News and World Report, one third of Americans think the kingdom will be coming soon. When I arrived at my parish in Ohio I was immediately invited to watch a movie with the youth entitled "Left Behind". "Left Behind" is the name of a whole industry built on a literal belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ and the end of the world.

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What do you believe about the Lord's final return and the end of the world? Do you ever think about it much? Christ has died. Christ is Risen! Christ will come again. I remember once being in the pulpit preaching on this kind of thing when a big thunderstorm arose, with massive sounds of thunder and flashes of lightening, and the power went completely off. I wondered if my Grandma Ford was really right after all!

According to Matthew in today's Gospel, Jesus teaches we are to live each day in a state of watchfulness, ready for the Lord's return. We are not to worry or fret or obsess about when it will come. Absolutely no one, except the Father, knows when it will occur. The thing isn't when it will occur. The thing isn't when will it occur. The thing is readiness.

And by readiness I mean, and I think Jesus meant, as Peter of Blois put it, the Second Coming, in the Soul, full of love, the Tenderest of friends.

You know as well as I do how easy it is for our hearts to get caught up in things that don't matter. And to allow ourselves to be hypnotized by them: possessions and money and fame and even dreams of personal immortality. If I can just die with grandchildren, I once thought, then I'll live on! And if I can get my family history written and a copy in the Library of Congress, to go with the other things already there with my name in them, before I die, I will live on. Why do you think I have been working on 16 family histories for the last 30 years? And that I have a fire-proof safe to hold all the irreplaceable documents? Pastors are quite capable of letting their hearts get weighed down with things that really don't matter. Why, you ought to know the names of all the powerful and famous people I have met! You should see the wonderful granite monument I designed for my great grandmother's grave - she died in 1924. I want her memory to live on forever! And I hounded relatives to help pay for it!

But, but yes, there are many buts.

The only one that counts is this one: "Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Jesus teaches that we should take heed to ourselves that God's Kingdom doesn't come upon us unaware, as something that surprises us or scares us. It is what we are to be praying for, hoping for, working for, and looking for, constantly. Thy Kingdom come, we pray week after week, Thy will be done, we add, on earth, as it is in heaven. We are, Jesus says, so to be ready for it, that we won't even blink when it arrives!

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Yet, the cares of this life very often take over our hearts so that Jesus has no room there. Some of us are waiting on tests to come back to see if we have cancer. Others are waiting to see if radiation and chemotherapy will stop the cancer we already have. Others' hearts are weighed down with grief that just won't go away. Others are unemployed and worrying how are we going to make it! Others are weighed down with anger and resentment and grudges and wanting to settle old scores. Others, more than a few, worry - just how much longer will I live? Then, there are all the cares that weigh our hearts down related to our children and grandchildren and our sisters and our brothers and our spouses and our parents.

Jesus tells us to be watchful. The Son of Man is sneaky! He will return when you least expect it. You may want to put his return off until some point in future time and call it the Second Coming. He may show up in 5 minutes in a hug from a friend or in a piece of bread and a sip of wine. You may want to put his return off until, well, for God's sake, at least let me get my Christmas shopping done first! - and then you have the accident and you survive, but your child doesn't and you are thrown into the depths of despair and you are ready to give up and die yourself. But a Pastor shows up, cries and prays with you and offers you the Sacrament and your broken heart is filled by the Love that will never let you go. It was Jesus in a second coming.

What I'm saying to you is that the Second Coming is now. In your Soul. Mysterious and filled with love. Jesus Our Lord as The Tenderest of Friends. In us. Through us.

We celebrate The Second Coming now – Jesus' presence in us and through us - through giving of ourselves to each other and to the needs of the hurting world. We feed the homeless. We have the Secret Santa drive. We write checks to HAGL, to the Salvation Army, to Habitat for Humanity and other agents of God's love. We collect clothing for PCC students in need. We volunteer our time. We visit the sick and the shut-in. In all these ways and more, we maintain the readiness Jesus requires.

Don't waste your time worrying or fretting about the third and final coming. The end of time - your life, the world's life – it's all in God's loving hands.

What counts is The Second Coming, the one that can occur right now, in the Soul, your soul, my soul, as they fill with Jesus' love, showing him to others as the Tenderest of friends.

Amen!

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