

Thy Kingdom Come

Luke 21:25-36

November 29, 2009

Part One-Children's Homily

Happy New Year! That's right, this is the first day of the new year. But today we're using a different kind of calendar. It's not like the one you have at home that starts on January 1. This is a special church calendar that starts today, four weeks before Christmas.

And the church calendar has seasons, but we don't call them spring, summer, winter, and fall like your other calendars. The church seasons have names like Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent. And the word Advent means that something or someone is coming. Does anyone know what or who is coming?

When Deacon Dave stood in the middle of the floor and read to us a few minutes ago, he told us that Jesus is coming. But he was not talking about celebrating Jesus being born a long time ago. Instead, he was talking about Jesus coming back to earth again, sometime in the future.

That means we're actually telling the story backwards. And because we're doing it backwards on purpose, I want to explain the entire story to you now in the way it is supposed to happen.

Baby Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. And God the Father in Heaven was Jesus' Father. We will celebrate this later, on Christmas. And Jesus grew up and became a young man and did many good things. Because God was his father, Jesus was very special, and he could perform miracles and make sick people become well.

But then something happened. Jesus died because some bad people did not like what he was doing. But in three days he came back to life and went to heaven to be with his Father. We will learn more about that later during Lent and Easter.

And here is the important part. Jesus is going to come back again! He is going to come back to earth from heaven and fix all the problems that people have created. People who have been good will be rewarded. People who have not been good will be sorry. And this will happen all over the world.

That's what we celebrate today. We call it Advent. We are celebrating that future time when Jesus will come back from heaven, and we don't know when it will happen. It's a big mystery, and no one knows when it will be except God the Father.

And you know what? Everything I have told you today is in the Bible. If we learn about the Bible we can know more about this important time. And that's what we're going to study in Sunday School for the next several weeks. So I want you to pay special attention in those classes.

And I also want to talk to everyone here in church about this important time. So now I'm going to ask you to go back and sit with your parents while I say some more about Advent.

Part Two-Sermon

I.

You now have heard the basics of how the church understands Advent, and so perhaps I could set the stage for examining today's Gospel with the story of the spider and the bug.

Once upon a time there was a spider who lived in a wheat field. He liked his home, and planned to stay there for the rest of his life. And one day a little bug got caught in the spider's

web. And as the spider was getting ready to eat him, the bug said, "If you let me go I will tell you something that will save your life."

The spider stopped, and told the bug to go ahead. "You better get out of this wheat field and find some other place to live," the bug said, "because the harvest is coming! All the wheat will be cut and gathered up, and you will be destroyed if you just stay here. You won't be ready."

The spider said, "I've heard all that before. I don't believe that stuff about harvests and separating wheat from chaff." So the spider went ahead and ate the bug for lunch. A few days later, the spider remembered what the bug said, and he thought to himself, "A harvest! That's foolish! I've lived here all my life and nothing like that has ever happened. Why, I even remember when these stalks of wheat were just a couple inches out of the ground. I don't have to change anything."

The next day was a beautiful sunny day in the wheat field. The sky was clear and there was no wind at all. That afternoon as the spider was about to take a nap, he noticed some thick dusty clouds moving toward him and the ground began to vibrate. He could hear the roar of a great engine getting closer and closer, and he said to himself, "I wonder what that could be?"

We have heard similar stories, haven't we? And they usually contain some pearl of wisdom and tell about an ill-fated central character who thought he knew best and had all the answers.

II.

And even though we might chuckle at these stories, the morals they contain and the messages they convey are not laughing matters. Today's Gospel is equally serious. Jesus said he will come again, unexpectedly and suddenly, and no one knows the day or time.

What's this all about? Are we to live in fear of judgment? Not at all. Jesus wanted to encourage us in today's lesson, not scare us. In First Thessalonians Paul said, "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9). And so the words of today's Gospel are not a threat, but rather words of hope that carry an eternal promise.

But we also are told to be ready. Jesus said to be awake and alert, and I don't think he was promoting coffee or caffeine pills. Rather, he was talking about putting God first, and living our lives as though we might actually see him coming in the clouds tomorrow.

III.

But do we really think that way? What difference does it make whether the second coming is about to happen, or is centuries away? Would we live differently in one case than in the other? Does the prospect of the future second coming actually affect our lives today?

Here's an example that might make the point. Remember when we were in school and the teacher said "I'm leaving the room and I'm not sure when I'll be back. But if I come back and find anyone out of their seat, they'll go to the principal's office." Sound familiar?

And then what happened as time passed and the teacher didn't return? Didn't we get restless? Weren't we tempted to misbehave as more time passed and the teacher still was away?

But there's a big difference between being in school then and living in the world now. If we got away with something in school before the teacher got back, the teacher probably would not know.

Is the same thing true now? Do we think that if Jesus is out of the room he will not know what we do? Do we think that all this end times stuff is somewhere in the distant future and we will never see it, so we shouldn't worry about it?

Well, one of the things we learned in school is that the teacher always did come back. In the same way, today's Gospel proclaims the certainty of Jesus' return and calls us to be ready.

But being ready does not mean being on the lookout, watching for Jesus to come back to the room, like we might have watched for our teachers so we could get back into our seats. Instead, we are called to be ready all the time in the way we live our lives.

And as I said earlier, we are not called to be ready out of fear, but with a sense of assurance. We should not anticipate impending doom, but rather the sure and certain hope of our salvation. This is not rocket science or complicated theology. We all can do it if we make the effort.

That effort, however, relates to spiritual rather than physical readiness. Today's Gospel calls us to go to church as well as to the gym. And there are some things we might consider as we get ready for that inevitable day. We might think of them as spiritual new year's resolutions.

For example, can resolve to get rid of patterns in our lives that are destructive, addictive, or that indulge our pride or vanity. Each of us, in some way or another, wrestles with those demons. Pride usually is a standard confession for me.

And we can resolve to extend ourselves to others. Human need is everywhere, both here in the church and in the community, and the need can be material, physical, spiritual, or something else. There always is work to be done to help other people.

We also can resolve to confront and withstand temptation. I have said before that Satan is not merely a symbol of the bad side of human nature. Satan is a real spiritual being and is intent on separating us from God. And we cannot oppose Satan and win. He is too strong. All we can do is just turn away and turn toward Christ as our source of strength.

Finally, we can be ready to know the truth, which is an elusive commodity in today's society where morality can be relative, ethics can be situational, and the basic question can be whether or not something works. God's truth, as I have said before, does not change.

And the world out there will not offer much help. Our hope is here, in the church, in community with each other. Our ministries enable us to help and comfort ourselves, as well as others. Our emphasis on Scripture, both in worship and education, supports knowing the truth.

IV.

And so, here we are. God's kingdom is a work in progress. The Prince of Peace already has come, but God's peace at the end of history is not yet here. The incomplete revelation of God's kingdom that we have today contends with a world still broken by sin and disobedience. And that world will not be fixed until the words of today's Gospel reading come to pass.

Therein lies our challenge, to live in a world of already, but not yet. We are called to live Christian lives in the midst of a contemporary world of pressures, temptations, and distractions.

In some ways today's Gospel reminds me of the priest at a gas station, waiting in line before a long holiday weekend to fill up his car. When he got out to wash his windows one of the cashiers, who was a member of the priest's church, saw him and came outside and said, "I'm sorry about the delay Father, it seems that everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The priest chuckled and said, "I know what you mean. It's the same in my business."

I pray that we don't wait until the last minute to watch and be prepared, and that we can live in ways that always make us ready for his coming again. As we start our new year here at St. Thomas, perhaps we can adopt some of those spiritual new year's resolutions to help us along the way. *Amen.*