

SERMON “PREPARING FOR HIS COMING”

(Mark 13:24-37 Preached at MPC on December 3, 2017 1st Sunday of Advent)

Today is the beginning of the Advent season—the first Sunday of the New Year on our liturgical calendar. We make the shift from Year A the Gospel of Matthew, to Year B, the Gospel of Mark. The dominant theme of Advent is Jesus’ coming—and Christ comes to us in three ways: As a baby born in Bethlehem, as a living presence in our world today, and as the risen Savior—a Savior who will come at the close of the age to reign in glory over all creation. This little snippet of liturgy from our Communion service today captures the essence of Jesus’ coming as well as anything I know: “Christ has come, Christ is come, Christ will come again.”

The gospel lesson for today focuses on the last part of this trilogy—the so-called Second Coming of Christ. And that’s what I’d like for us to think about in the sermon this morning: What do we mean by the Second Coming, as opposed to the first or third or last coming? As importantly, what do we believe about the Second Coming?

To be honest, the Second Coming doesn’t rank high on the food chain for most Presbyterians. Oh, we say the words. For example, in the Nicene Creed we’ll say plainly: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God ... (who) for us and our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.” We’ll go on to talk about Jesus’ passion, death, resurrection and ascension, and then we’ll say, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” (Nicene Creed)

So, why are we so ho-hum about it? If we really believe Jesus is coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead, shouldn’t that strike fear and trembling in our hearts? What gives? I checked the pcusa.org web site to get our denominational line on the Second Coming and made an interesting discovery. It says: “(We) also believe that Jesus will one day return to the earth to complete the task of creating a world where justice, peace and love rule and evil is no more. To those who believe in Christ, such an event is seen not with fear but with joyful anticipation.”

If I read that correctly, we believe in the Second Coming, not so much as a threat to our well-being, but as the fulfillment of our hopes and dreams for a world of peace and harmony, a world in which we are no longer at war or at odds with each other. So, if I’ve got it right, Christ will come again in glory to judge us, and we’re to look forward to that

with joyful anticipation. Hmm. I don't know about you, but we've all been subjected to some kind of judgment or evaluation before – times when our work has been closely scrutinized, and I'm sure we've all found that experience to be excruciating, anything but joyful.

As a music major at USC years ago, we were required to end each semester by playing a solo or an etude on our major instrument—for me that included all the instruments of the percussion family before a small panel of faculty members. We called them juries, and that was a pretty good name for it. We were on trial, and our semester grade depended on how well we played. Now If you went on to make your living as a symphony musician, you were always expected to audition for the conductor of the orchestra and members of the orchestral committee whenever a vacancy occurred—sometimes right on the spot.

As a candidate for ordination, something brother Dion is looking forward to, once a church issues a call, you must appear before the presbytery, give your statement of faith and then the floor is open to all members—they can ask any and all questions related to your theology and experience. I can tell you, I didn't look forward to that day with joyful anticipation when the time came.

We're judged all the time, and, each time, it comes with a bit of nervous trepidation. Just invite a few friends over for dinner. A little voice inside clicks on and says, "You'd better get in high gear." So, you clean the house thoroughly, put stuff away and prepare a scrumptious meal and make sure everything is just so—not that your friends would notice if you didn't. Yeah, right!

Or, say, you have a job interview. Don't tell me you're not going to be on edge. After all, you want to make a good impression. You want to look your best and be at the top of your game. So, when I read that Jesus' coming "is seen not with fear but with joyful anticipation," I'll just have to tell you I'm a little apprehensive—I believe God's judgment is far more serious than that, and that it's likely to be painful.

The prophet Malachi compared it to purifying metal. He said, "But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like launderer's soap; and he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, and refine them as gold and silver; and they shall offer to

Yahweh offerings in righteousness.” We all know the words of the 51st Psalm, where David prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.” (Psalms 51:10) But what we may overlook is that, in order to have a clean heart, he also prays, “Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” (Psalms 57:7) Do you have any idea what hyssop is? Hyssop is a plant with medicinal qualities, not the least of which is a powerful laxative. In other words, when David prays, “Purify me with hyssop,” he’s talking the bowels in the digestive tract.

Here’s the point: Jesus will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and the extent that we fail to be just; that we fail to live in peace with others; that we refuse to love our neighbors—including our enemies—and that evil still lurks within our hearts—his coming promises to be a painful experience, in which case, we do well to be just a tad fearful. If so, what might we do to prepare for his coming? Here’s my short list.

First, make amends. Resolve any outstanding grievances. Put away old grudges. If you’ve wronged somebody, go to him or her and apologize. If they won’t forgive you, that’s their problem. It’s up to you to own up to what you’ve said or done and seek to make amends. The 8th and 9th steps of the AA program require the recovering alcoholic to go back to all those he’s lied, stolen from and cheated in any way and make a full confession— and if possible make retribution. I’ve heard stories about some musicians in LA when I lived there that you could NOT leave them alone for a second in your house—if you did, stuff could be missing when they left, all for a drug fix!

There’s a story of a man who wanted to take that step of making amends to the next level. Story is he sat down with his former employer and went through his personnel record, page by page—painful. He even called the IRS and asked to speak with a supervisor to tell him he’d cheated on his income tax. He said it was a humbling experience, but one of the most empowering things he’d ever done. For the first time in years, he could look in the mirror and not be ashamed of himself. Make amends. That’s one side of the coin, and the flip side is, if someone has wronged you, you’re to take the initiative and do what you can to resolve the conflict.

Jesus taught his disciples, “If therefore you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Reconciliation

takes precedence over worship! So, to prepare for Christ's coming, first make amends.

And second, square your debts. I have joked with Margie many times in the past about when I go to meet the Lord—she knows I need to have all my credit cards and debts paid—one of my fears is the Lord will send me back to pay off any outstanding balances. Paul told the Romans in 13:8, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.” That doesn't mean you can't borrow money to buy a house or start a business or pay off a new car. It has to do with being so encumbered that you're not free to be in relationship with Christ.

Dave Ramsey is the creator of Financial Peace University in 2012, a biblically based training series for adults that integrates video teaching, class discussions, and small group activities. The video teaching series started as a 13-week program in 2012 and covers topics such as cash flow planning, saving, investing, credit, retirement, and giving. There have been many congregations who have subscribed to Dave's Financial Peace thirteen-week program and realized very positive effects of this program designed to help young couples and families get out of debt, and learn to manage their money.

For many young families, they have cut up hundreds of credit cards and are now living on a pay-as-you-go budget. They use cash for their discretionary spending—things like going out to eat, going to a movie, taking a weekend trip— so that, if they don't have the money, they don't go. It's given them more control over their lives and a less stress over their money. In gratitude, many have started tithing.

But Paul wasn't just talking about money, he was also talking about constantly being on the receiving end, letting others do all the work, taking advantage of others' good will, being dependent on the generosity of others. Pete Smith is the director of Faith Mission, Wichita Falls, TX, which serves food and provides shelter for men, women, mothers with children through a one-year recovery program struggling with addiction. Their Mission: To provide Christ-centered programs and services that lead the homeless toward self-sufficiency.

One of Pete's favorite sayings is, “There are givers and there are takers.” As far as Pete was concerned, you were one or the other. Those who lined up at the mission for a free meal were the takers and those who bought the groceries and did the cooking were the givers. There's a truth to this: Some people are generous beyond all expectation. They'd

give you the shirt off their back. Others always have their hand out wanting more. And, what we need to be clear about is this: While everyone needs a helping hand, from time to time, being a giver or a taker is largely a matter of choice. No matter how much or little you have, you can contribute something—but it's up to you to decide.

What do we have so far to prepare for Christ's second coming: Point one, make amends; point two, square our debts; and point three, exercise self-restraint. To put it bluntly, curb our appetites. We are just coming off the Thanksgiving celebration and maybe some of us still eating left-over turkey. We live in a gluttonous age. Everywhere we turn we're encouraged to eat more, buy more, do more, want more. Now, more than ever, we need to learn to just say no.

Look around you. Remember when Coca-Cola came in a six-ounce bottle and a hamburger consisted of a thin slice of meat on a bun? Now everything is super-sized. You can get a 32-ounce Coke with a triple-decker half-pound hamburger with cheese and bacon and a jumbo order of fries. I saw a blip on a TV program this week where the NFL is sponsoring a program to combat obesity in children. Can't you just see a 350-pound lineman telling a third-grader, "Hey, kid, you ought to lose some weight!" How ironic is that? Speaking of television, in the early days programs used to come on only at certain times of the day—the rest of the time there was this test signal and long steady tone. Now you can watch TV twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with a selection of a hundred channels or more.

Besides television, there's the computer. At the click of a mouse, you can surf the Internet day and night. You can email and shop and do research and study. You can also play video games and delve into all sorts of exotic web sites, or so I'm told. It's all there at your fingertips, inviting, tempting and seductive.

"O How the Mighty Have Fallen"—I used that phrase a few Sundays ago in one of my sermons. This past Wednesday the news tabloids announced longtime NBC host Matt Lauer fired for sexual misconduct. Also, favorite Minnesota Radio Host Garrison Keillor was also let go for inappropriate behavior. So far, the public list includes mighty Sony movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey, and just recently CBS favorite TV anchor Charlie Rose. I'm still in shock with Charlie and Matt but the verdict is the same. Jesus could come at any moment—the Bible says no one knows not even Christ! How do we prepare for Christ's second coming? I suggest we do what the Word of God tells us—

we make amends, we square our debts, and we exercise self-restraint—as we light that first candle of hope for Advent—my hope and prayer is that we need to choose carefully how we handle our finances, what we do, where we go, what we say. At the end of the age when Christ comes again—we can relax—we'll be ready! Amen.