

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

November 27, 2022 – ADVENT 1, YEAR A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “HOPE Does Not Disappoint”

Isaiah 2:1-5 (A prophecy of the coming Messiah)  
Psalm 122 (A song of praise for God's Temple)  
Romans 13:8-14 m (Salvation is near; draw close to Jesus)  
St. Matthew 24:36-44 (Jesus teaches: Be ready for His coming)

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What do *you* do, when you're preparing for the arrival of a special guest? With the holidays coming, many of you are either expecting company, or you just had a bunch of folks over for Thanksgiving. So, come on, speak up, what are some of the things you do to prepare for a special guest?

Advent is the season of the Christian year in which, traditionally, we prepare our *hearts* for the coming of Jesus Christ. It is a season pregnant with expectations, as we journey once again with Mary, anticipating the birth of the baby Jesus. But like every believer after the first century, we now live on the *other* side of Christ's *first* coming. WE are awaiting His *return*. The Scripture lessons for Advent look backward, to Israel's expectation of the Messiah, as well as forward, to the ultimate triumph of Christ the King—which we celebrated last Sunday, at the culmination of the Church year.

You mentioned some things you would do to prepare for a special guest's arrival. But how many of you would go to that kind of trouble, if you didn't really expect that person to show up after all? Hey, *I wouldn't!*

But the question this morning is: How would we prepare our hearts, and our lives, if we *truly* believed that Jesus Christ might come at any minute? What does the *Bible* say we should do, in anticipation of His return?

Jesus utters a prophecy about His Second Coming, in Luke, Chapter 21, exactly one chapter before Judas betrays Him, setting in motion the events that will lead to His death. This same prophecy is found in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. Those Gospel writers tell us Jesus spoke to the disciples on the Mount of Olives, where, in a matter of hours, He would pray before going to the cross. Jesus knows it is His time to go back to the Father. But also, He knows His disciples will not understand how He can leave them. So He wants to encourage them, assuring them of His eventual return.

My sister-in-law's husband, when he was still her fiancé, served several terms doing military security in Afghanistan and other extremely dangerous places overseas. The only way Kris could endure Jay's long absences was by holding on to the *firm hope*—and the strong belief—that *he would return*.

And hope is what the Holy Spirit is calling us to focus on, today. The Oxford Dictionary definition of “hope” is “a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen,” or, “wanting something to happen or be the case.” That reference work also lists an archaic meaning, “a feeling of trust.” Indeed, trust is a component of hope. Lyana Pearson, writing online for ThriveGlobal, comments, “Hope is a ... powerful word that inspires millions of people ... . Hope is huge. It's necessary. It's motivating and in some cases life-saving. My favorite definition of hope is: to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment (Merriam-Webster, definition #2). To many, having hope means ... they have absolute faith that everything will work out. These people are using hope to its fullest.”<sup>1</sup>

All of these notions of hope are consistent with the biblical concept of hope, specifically, with our hope that the Lord Jesus will return someday, perhaps even in our own time. The hope of Christ's second coming has been part of Christian faith ever since the first century A.D. But what can we look to that will guarantee this hope, help us to take it more seriously and prepare more purposely for its fulfillment?

First, if we believe the Holy Scriptures, the New Testament contains at least 100 verses about the second coming of Christ. One of the most reassuring is often heard at funerals. From John 14:1-3: “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

When we celebrate Ascension Day, we tend to gloss over the conclusion of the angels' message to Christ's disciples, when they state: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come [again] in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). And in Matthew 25:31 (NASB), Jesus declares, “when the Son of

Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.” So, we can trust that Christ will return, based on the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Himself.

Second, if we accept the evidence of Scripture and truly believe Christ will come again—albeit, as He says in today’s Gospel, “at an unexpected hour”—we will take seriously the imminent return of the Lord. But how are we to prepare for something so momentous when we have no idea when it will happen? Especially, since Jesus warns us in today’s Gospel, “you must be ready.” And in Revelation 16:15, Jesus announces, “Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed.” There are many other Bible verses and parables about staying awake and being prepared for the coming of the Lord. And yet, what exactly does that mean for our lives today?

One of Rick’s and my favorite quotations is from Martin Luther, who said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”<sup>2</sup> So how do we go about planting our apple trees? Once more, we return to Scripture for sound advice. In Hebrews 10:24-25, we read: “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Ah, we are to continue loving others and doing good works, as we encourage each other and keep going to church. *With God’s help, we can do that!*

First Peter 4:7-10 (NIV) tells us: “The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” So, we are to keep praying, be pleasantly hospitable, love each other, serve others, and use to the fullest the gifts God has given us. *With God’s help, we can do that!*

And finally, in Titus 2:11-14 (NIV), we hear: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Those instructions are pretty clear, and I think *With God’s help, we can do that!*

And yet, so much of this good counsel has to do with our *outward* conduct as Christians—all of which is fine and good. But the Lord wants us to prepare our *hearts* for Him. How do we do that? In Acts 3:19-21, we hear: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” Now we’re getting to the hard stuff. It’s so much easier to donate a Thanksgiving dinner to charity or visit a sick friend, than to allow ourselves to be vulnerable before God, openly listing our sins, being truly sorry for them, and asking His forgiveness.

What we need to remember is that it’s *safe* to come to God with *anything* that’s in our hearts and minds, because of His great love for us. Psalm 62:8 encourages us: “Trust in him at all times ... pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.” God is our safe harbor, our fortress, the place where no one else can attack, hurt, or destroy us. Sincere self-examination and genuine repentance may not be easy, but with God’s grace and the assurance of His endless mercy, *we can do that!*

As we go forward this week, I’d like to close by sharing a favorite Scripture verse (Romans 5:2b-5 RSV) that I have always found greatly encouraging: “... we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

We have *hope* because God loves us; therefore we can have *faith* that Christ will return; and in the meantime, we can pray for the grace to practice *love* in all things. Hope, faith, and love. Hang onto those three as we journey through Advent.

And finally, a benediction from 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, in the words of Eugene Peterson’s, “The Message: “May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he’ll do it!” *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Lyana Pearson, “Hope is a Powerful Word,” 19 August 2019, [ThriveGlobal](https://community.thriveglobal.com/hope-is-a-powerful-word/) <https://community.thriveglobal.com/hope-is-a-powerful-word/> 18 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> “Martin Luther, Quotes, Quotable Quote,” [GoodReads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/35396-even-if-i-knew-that-tomorrow-the-world-would-go) <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/35396-even-if-i-knew-that-tomorrow-the-world-would-go> 21 November 2022.