

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

November 28, 2021 – ADVENT 1, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Christ, our HOPE*”

Jeremiah 33:14-16	(A prophecy of the coming of the Messiah)
Psalms 25:1-9	(A prayer for God’s forgiveness and guidance)
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13	(St. Paul prays that we might remain blameless and holy until the Lord returns)
St. Luke 21:25-36	(Jesus warns about the end times and His return)

During the 2008 economic recession, one television commentator began his newscast by saying, “Due to the current financial crisis, the light at the end of the tunnel will be turned off.” The world may turn off lights. But we Christians turn them on. During the season of winter in nature, and Advent in the Church, light (*especially* light at the end of a tunnel) represents *hope*. That which pierces our darkness is the Light of Christ, whom we celebrate this morning as our Hope.¹

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, begins the season in the Church year when we anticipate the coming of Christ into the world. The word “Advent” (from the Latin, *adventus*) means “a coming on the scene” or “an arrival.” These concepts illustrate the underlying tension or balance that permeates our Christian faith. On the one hand, we joyfully anticipate Jesus’ first coming, celebrating His Nativity at Christmas. On the other hand, we look forward—somewhat more soberly—to His second coming at the end of this present age, when earth-shaking, awe-inspiring events will culminate in all of Creation submitting to God’s sovereign rule at last.

As we journey closer to Christmas we will turn our attention more toward the birth of Christ. However, today’s Scriptures call us to focus on Jesus’ *second coming*, if for no other reason than to provide a meaningful transition from our Celebration of Christ as King of Heaven and Earth, back to His long-expected advent as an innocent child.² And yet, the Second Coming of Christ is much more important than merely serving to complete a liturgical cycle. We need to unpack what the Bible has to say about it.

One scholar has estimated that in the Old Testament, there are 1,845 references to the return of the Messiah, where 17 books give this event prominence. He found that in the 260 chapters of the New Testament, there are 318 references—an amazing 1 out of every 30 verses—to the imminent return of Christ. With 23 out of 27 books in the New Testament referring to this amazing source of our hope, that means for every Bible prophecy concerning Christ’s *first* advent, there are 8 that look forward to His *second* coming.³ Clearly, we need to take this seriously!

In today’s gospel reading, St. Luke envisions Christ’s imminent return as “the Son of man coming in a cloud,” with “power and great glory.” Those words may be familiar to you from our Eucharistic liturgy. They should also tweak your memory of last Sunday’s Old Testament reading, in which the prophet Daniel saw a vision of the throne room of Almighty God: “I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.” (Dan. 7:13). The literal translation of “son of man” denotes ‘a human being.’ But in Daniel’s prophecy, the expression “son of man” denotes one who is the truest representative of God’s chosen people, Israel. To Him, God has granted “dominion and glory and kingship, [so] that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him,” as we heard last Sunday in Daniel 7:14.

Certain religious scholars are concerned that the biblical reference “coming with the clouds of heaven” has caused a great deal of anxiety, if not actual damage, to Christian thought and practice. They fear that too many Christians take this concept literally. As a result, a whole industry has developed around the so-called misuse of apocalyptic language.⁴

For instance, Hal Lindsey's 1970 best-seller, The Late Great Planet Earth, in which the author cited an increase in the frequency of famines, wars, and earthquakes, as major events just prior to the end of the world. He also predicted a ten-nation European confederacy before the formation of the European Union.⁵ For some time, his book incited widespread panic—imagine what scenarios his readers concocted about the ten-member European Union that simply led to the standardization of currency, passports, and certain laws, across Western Europe.

In the later 20th century, the best-selling Left Behind series grabbed the public's attention when the authors used the apocalyptic language of Daniel and the Book of Revelation to predict a timetable leading up to the Day of the Lord. And back in 2012, a near-hysterical alarm was raised over the allegedly supernatural revelation in the Mayan calendar that claimed the world would end on December 21, 2012. Of course, it didn't. But at the time, I thought: "Hey, if that's true, I don't have to do any Christmas shopping or worry about a Christmas Eve sermon!" But of course, all of the hype was non-sensical, as well as non-biblical.

It is true that the Second Coming of Christ, which the Bible clearly says will be accompanied by cosmic cataclysms and the end of the world as we know it, has at various times throughout history, caused great anxiety among the people of God. In the Middle Ages, penitents who feared the coming wrath of the Lord went about the streets flogging themselves with barbed whips, crying out for mercy. Here in our own country, some apocalyptic-minded groups have given away all their belongings and sold their homes, as they wait to be taken up to heaven—only to discover it isn't happening.

This sort of "chicken little" behavior is completely opposite from the peace that passes all understanding, which God wants us to have through faith in His written Word, the Bible, and in His Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. As far as the timetable for Christ's return, our Lord Himself tells us in Mark 13:32: "About that day or hour *no one* knows, neither the angels in heaven, *nor* the Son, but only the Father." Therefore, to try to predict a time schedule for the end of the world is totally useless, because first, the world will not so much be *destroyed* as *transformed*—into a new creation. Second, we can never truly know when that transformation will occur, nor do we have a *need* to know.

At the risk of repeating myself, I remind you that Martin Luther said, "If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree." Like him, we are to go about our business, and not be overly preoccupied about when Christ will return. However, Our Lord does call us to be fully *prepared* to meet Him at any time, so as not to be caught off guard when He *does* appear. Remember what Jesus told His disciples? Be alert! Stay awake! Keep watch!

There are signs indicating that Christ will return, but these are to encourage us to vigilance and prayer, and are not to be used for chronological calculations. In the meantime, there is work to be done. What a rallying cry for us during Advent! As we prepare to sing, "Let every heart prepare Him room," perhaps we would do well to say: let every heart get out the bulldozers and backhoes, the rock crushers and road graders! There are mountains that need to come down, mountains of racism, ageism, sexism, and "-isms" of every kind that block our way to healthier relationships with one another and with our Lord.⁶

There are valleys to be filled, valleys of depression, despair, loneliness, grief, or pain, any of which can keep us from the rich relationship our Savior offers, or from fully enjoying the fellowship of our faith community. There are crooked places to be made straight; yes, there is perversity, even among those we might never imagine—fine exteriors mask rotten interiors of abuse, neglect, immorality, even violence. There are rough places to be made smooth, huge pot holes and axel-busting ruts deformed through oppression and injustice. Until Christ returns, there's work to do! Bring on the heavy equipment!

Jesus came the first time to defeat sin and death once and for all. And rising from the dead, He ascended to the right hand of the Father, where He has been given glory, dominion, power, and kingship over all of Creation. As the Ruler of the Universe, He will come again in judgment, on the Day of the Lord—not to wreak havoc and unleash destruction for no reason, but to make right all that God intended from the very beginning!

Finally, evil will be defeated forever! Justice will be meted out with equity and righteousness! The wicked will get what's coming to them, and the horrors and despair of this world will pass away. If this biblical vision does not give us *hope*, nothing can!

In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, St. Paul expresses his hope in what is to come: "According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words."

Indeed! We should encourage each other with these promises of Holy Scripture. For, when Jesus comes again, we shall bask in the righteousness of God, relishing His verdict of acquittal that has been granted in advance to all who put their faith and trust in Christ, their Risen Savior, Lord and King over all. As believers resurrected into His heavenly kingdom, we shall live in peace and harmony eternally, abiding in the very presence of Almighty God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁷

However, until then, we *wait*. And as we wait, Jesus calls us to remain alert, stay awake, and keep watch. We are to get our spiritual house in order. To read our Bible and say our prayers with greater devotion. To forgive both our friends *and* our enemies. To give away whatever we don't need and let go of our attachment to the things of this world. And, we ought to pause occasionally and ask ourselves, "If Jesus came back *right now*, how would He find me?"

All of this points up the peculiar tension amidst which we are called to live out our lives in preparation and anticipation for the day when Jesus will return. Yet, as we wait with patience and in *hope*, we also journey toward the remembrance of Christ's *first* coming at His Nativity, giving thanks and praise to the Lord that God Himself chose to become one of us, that He might share our joys and sorrows, understand us from the inside out—and still love us unconditionally.

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our griefs and cares to bear. May He grant us a blessed and faithful Advent, as in hope—not fear—we await the day of His coming. Amen.

¹ Adapt. William R. Boyer, "Turn on the Lights!" *A God Full of Surprises*, The Disciplers <<http://thedisciplers.com/sermon-illustrations-about-repentance-and-second-coming-of-christ/>> 1 December 2012. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Carl D. Mann, "First Sunday of Advent, Year C, BCP Lectionary," St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Spirit Lake 29 November 2009, <<http://www.stalbanepiscopalchurch.org/sermons.php>> 28 November 2012.

³ *Today in the Word* (Moody Bible Institute, April 1989) p. 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "The Late, Great Planet Earth," Wikipedia.org, 22 October 2021 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Late_Great_Planet_Earth> 20 November 2021.

⁶ Adapt. David E. Leininger, "There's Work to Do!" *One Shock after Another*, The Disciplers <<http://thedisciplers.com/sermon-illustrations-about-repentance-and-second-coming-of-christ/>> 1 December 2012.

⁷ Adapt. Mann, *op. cit.*