

“Come, Lord Jesus!”

Luke 12.35-40; James 5.7-8; Revelation 22.12-21

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There’s some confusion about what today is: is it Advent, or is it Christmas? The liturgical purists would say that it’s still Advent, until the sun goes down; then it becomes Christmas Eve. It is, to be precise, the fourth week of Advent, albeit briefly. Because of the way the days fall this year we have the shortest fourth week of Advent that we can possibly have – a grand total of about 18 hours, and it’s already more than half over!

But then – Jesus never *told* us to have a “season of Advent” with four weeks and four candles and all the rest. The liturgical calendar was created by man, not by God. What Jesus told us to do was to *wait* and *watch*, to *keep our lamps trimmed and burning*, for the time is drawing nigh; “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” We spend a great deal of time and energy getting ready for Christmas every year, which comes predictably on December 25 whether we’re ready for it or not – but when *Jesus* is coming, well, we don’t get to know that day in advance.

I always find myself amazed at just how much *effort* we put into Christmas, both in our personal lives and here at church. I can’t begin to tell you how busy we’ve been around here for the past couple weeks, trying to make sure we’re ready for these services today; and even when we *think* we’ve got all the details squared away, it turns out that there are *more*. Then add to the mix some unexpected surprises: the wi-fi in half the church quit working last week; the sound system crashed out last Sunday; the automated prayer chain malfunctioned on Wednesday; and the heat gave out in the nursery. Seriously? All in the space of a *week*, right before *Christmas*? We’ve managed to fix all of that except the nursery (we tried Plan A and Plan B and they both didn’t work; we’re now onto plan C; and we should have it fixed by next week). Each of those issues took a good chunk of time *time*, and *time* is a precious commodity at any time of year, *especially* the week before Christmas. They all felt like major *distractions*, pulling us away from what we’re trying to celebrate here. Was it a coincidence that it all happened in the week before Christmas? I think not! I think there’s something in this universe that doesn’t want us to focus our attention on the reality that God chose to come *here*, to *this* earth, to *these* people, to *you*, to *me*. I was talking with one of you last week, in the midst of all the drama, and we found ourselves re-affirming the truth that Jesus *came* – whether we celebrate it every year or not!

The other thing I’m so often struck by at Christmas time is just how much *suffering* and *pain* there is in this world. Some of us have the luxury of enjoying festive family celebrations, with good

presents, good food, and good times, while other people are really hurting. Some of us have the freedom to try to create the *perfect Christmas* – the perfect tree, the perfect decorations, the perfect ornaments, the perfect presents, the perfect wrapping, the perfect menu – while others are just looking for some glimmer of *hope*, some ounce of *joy*. There's a family I know in crisis right now, because of some poor choices that are going to impact people for the rest of their lives. There are families we know that are mourning the loss of dearly beloved family members, and other families dealing with the ravages of mental illness or dementia. Someone I know is trying to figure out how to scrape by while they look for new employment. Someone I know has just received a very frightening cancer diagnosis. Someone I know has been falsely accused of significant crimes. Someone I know worries what will happen if he's ever pulled over by a police car, simply because of the color of his skin. Someone I know is trying to figure out how to get out from under nearly a hundred thousand dollars' worth of student loan debt. Numerous people I know are trying to figure out how to break free from an addiction. And then there are the headlines. North Korea. National politics. Election drama. Church shootings. The news can be very depressing, and frightening, and there are a lot of people today living in *anger*, or living in *fear*, and not in the *peace* and the *hope* and the *love* and the *joy* that Christmas embodies. And then you walk into a store, filled with holiday shoppers, and you hear the song "Frosty the Snowman" over the speakers, and you think, *really?* Is *that* the best we can do – a corn-cob pipe and a button nose, and two eyes made out of coal? I mean, it's *cute*; I enjoyed songs like that as a kid; but really, look around, *wake up*, observe what's *really going on in this world*, the suffering, the pain, the despair – is there *anything to hope for?* Is there really any *good news* that truly outweighs all the bad?

Two thousand years ago. An obscure town in a remote corner of the world. A people living under foreign oppression. A religious system steeped in tradition and ritual, and lacking in substance. Decent people, for the most part, trying to eke out a decent living under hard circumstances. Suffering. Pain. Despair. Lack of hope. ... Prophet. Angel. Young, unmarried, pregnant woman. Son of God. Savior. Hope. *Joy*. Peace and love, Word-made-flesh, incarnate. *Emmanuel*.

The world was a mess ... and humanity couldn't put it right. Only *God* could.

And ... *God did*. *God* cares about us *that much*.

C. S. Lewis called it an "invasion." Christ's coming to this earth, Christ's incarnation, becoming *human*, *Emmanuel*, God with us – an invasion, like the Allied forces storming the beaches at Normandy, fighting their way through enemy lines, toppling the strongholds of darkness, bringing *liberation*, bringing *freedom*, bringing *hope*, bringing an *end* to the endless sea of suffering and pain and despair.

And so Christ *lived!* And so Christ died. And so Christ *rose*, triumphant, victorious over the grave, ascendant into heaven, taking his place at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

And the world carried on. For two thousand years, the world has carried on. And still there is suffering, and still there is pain, and still there is despair. *Why?* *Why* does it continue if Christ came? Wasn't his coming supposed to put an *end* to all this?

Well, *yes*. But not all at once. There's an order to these things. He did not sit on a regal throne

and wear a golden crown here on this earth. He sits on a regal throne and wears a golden crown – *where?* Well, *heaven* is the obvious answer; we’ve all seen paintings of Christ sitting in majesty.

And what good does that do? I’m not trying to be flippant, but really, there are people who seriously wonder, *if Christ is sitting up there on that throne, why doesn’t he fix all this mess?* Why are there still so many people, so many families, so many *nations*, hurting, suffering, despairing, right here, right now, on the eve of Christmas, when we celebrate the greatest *gift* humanity has ever received?

Because ... because ... there are a couple things that still need to happen.

One is: Christ’s coming. His *second* coming. Promised in a multitude of places in the scriptures. “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.” “Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” “The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” “Surely I am coming soon.” And so on. We’re in Advent. We’re *always* in Advent. Not just in these four weeks leading up to Christmas. We are *always* expectantly, hopefully, confidently awaiting the coming of Christ. Or, we *should* be. Advent should not be relegated to four Sundays a year. We should adopt an Advent mentality throughout the *entire* year, until he comes in glory.

So Jesus needs to come back. That’s one thing that needs to happen. And it will happen on *God’s* timing, not ours. It’s not on any calendar. No one *really* knows when it will occur (even the people who claim that they do). Who knows? Maybe it will be this week. Maybe three billion years from now. I don’t know! What I do know is, God promises that the end of this story will be filled with *hope*. All the suffering, the pain, the despair – it’s all going to be gone. Jesus is going to see to that!

So what do we do while we wait? Here’s the other thing that needs to happen: we need to give Jesus a *regal throne* and a *golden crown* – in our *hearts*. Not just sing songs about him, not just admire those works of art that depict him in his heavenly glory, but actually subject ourselves to his will, his wisdom, his teaching, his Lordship. The carols we sing remind us to do this: “Let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room.” “Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love, me, I pray.” “O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.” This is simply a matter of saying, *Your will, not my will, be done, O Lord*, and then disciplining yourself to follow through on that, day after day, week after week. And when temptation comes – temptation to wander down some *other* path – to apply yourself in the school of prayer, inviting God-With-You to keep you on target. The trick is keeping your eyes, your mind, your heart, fixed on *him*. There are *plenty* of things (like malfunctioning systems at church!) that try to distract us from *him*.

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift.”

So come, Lord Jesus. *Come*, Lord Jesus. Come to this world, again, in glory. Come bring us hope, and love, and joy, and peace, *really, truly*, the only hope and love and joy and peace worth having, worth sharing. Come to our hearts; *reign in* our hearts; help us choose always and ever as *you* would have us choose. Come to us, Lord Jesus; come to us, Emmanuel.

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