



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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In Days to Come

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In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it ... He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:2-4).

Advent is about getting ready for the coming of Christ, which is not at all the same thing as getting ready for Christmas.

Christmas is a tame and familiar affair, filled with favorite traditions, seasonal music, and the hope of happy times with family and friends. Preparing for Christmas is a matter of cooking and cleaning, buying gifts and decorating houses, and exchanging cards with people you may not have seen for a while but want to stay in touch with, at least once a year. Christmas is a holiday, and holidays for us now are mostly about taking time off and having fun.

Christ, on the other hand, is anything but tame and familiar. He comes as King of kings and Lord of lords, ruler of heaven and earth, judge of the quick and the dead, as the Apostle's Creed reminds us. We don't have lords in our democratic society, but scripture tells us that creation itself has a Lord, and every creature on earth exists by his grace and ultimately answers to him.

Getting ready for Christmas is about preparing our surroundings for a couple of weeks in winter. Getting ready for Christ is about preparing our souls for all eternity.

Even the way we celebrate Christmas is a bit misleading in this regard, since Jesus appears for the holiday mainly in the form of a babe in a manger. Babies are cute and cuddly, and the big people around them are completely in charge and retain all the power. The King of kings may be many things, but cute and cuddly he is not. When he comes, he will be the one with all the power and authority, and every knee on earth and in heaven will bend before him. No wonder most of us are far more comfortable thinking and talking about Christmas than we are thinking and talking about the coming of Christ.

But Advent is all about Christ, not about the holiday we call Christmas. The Bible, of course, has nothing to say about Christmas cards and ornaments on trees, but it has everything to say about getting ready for the coming of the Lord.

Listen again, then, to some of what scripture tells us about what it means to be prepared.

The Bible says that in days to come God will rule in all the earth. And when God rules, the prophet Isaiah says, nation will not lift up sword against nation any more. Now the word translated “nation” from Hebrew and Greek really means “people” rather than what we think of as a nation state like France or Germany or the United States. It means that no racial or ethnic or linguistic group will be hostile towards another when God’s kingdom comes and God’s will

is done on earth as it is in heaven. All the tribal enmities of this world will be set aside, and no one will learn war any more.

Among other things, this means that getting ready for the coming of Christ implies learning and doing the things that make for peace. Peace in the Bible is never just a ceasefire, a temporary pause in the midst of ongoing hostilities. Peace in the Bible is always the result of justice and righteousness. It means doing what's right and fair for all God's people. That's true because justice and righteousness, together with love and mercy, are what God wants, and what God requires of us, and true peace is impossible without those things.

The spirit of fear and anger and hostility towards whole groups of people is the very opposite of the spirit of the kingdom of God. Of course all people want to be safe and take reasonable precautions to protect themselves and their loved ones. Everybody believes in that. But in our day many are busy making swords out of ploughshares, physically attacking or verbally assaulting others with hateful words and aggressive attitudes, letting loose the ugliest impulses of human nature.

When people do that, they run headlong against the spirit of Christ, even if they call themselves Christians. But the Bible reminds us that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. The Word of God, who is Christ himself, will cut through every self-justifying rationalization and judge the innermost thoughts and intentions of every human heart. For that reason again,

it's no wonder that people find it so much easier to get ready for Christmas and to get ready for the coming of Christ.

St. Paul says, "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law." Here Paul simply echoes Jesus, who said that everything comes down to loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. One of our members teases me gently about the fact that this line keeps cropping up in most of my sermons. That's true, and the reason is that it's the Great Commandment, the central theme of biblical faith. We need to keep hearing it, over and over again, because it's easy enough to say but terribly hard to live out, and so we always need to be reminded. Even some Christians don't seem to take the commandment very seriously, judging by the way they treat and talk about other human beings.

Owe no one anything except to love one another, Paul says. If we do that concretely, not just in words but in all the ways we act, then everything else will come together for good.

And you know what time it is, Paul says. What time is he talking about? He's talking about time to get ready for the coming of Christ. Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed, Paul says, and surely that's true—though not necessarily in the way some people think.

All sorts of preachers, including a good many on television and radio and the internet, talk as if they knew that the end time is near, that the end of the world as we know it is coming soon. But that's a strange thing to claim, since Jesus himself said he did not know when the end would

come. “Of that day and hour no one knows,” Jesus says, “but only the Father in heaven.”

The message of Jesus, and the message of Paul, is this: Be ready. Keep awake. Stay alert. Be prepared even now, every day, because no one knows when Christ will come again.

For all the speculation about the end of the world, which sells so many books and generates so many listeners and contributors to people who cannot actually know these things, the simple truth is, it doesn't really matter when Jesus comes. It doesn't matter because we need to be ready at all times anyway. We're responsible for doing God's will always and everywhere, no matter what time it is. And if we're doing that—if we really are loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves—we will be ready to meet Jesus whenever he comes.

And truth be told, Christ will come to each of us when we meet him at the end of this life, one way or another. In that sense too, what Paul says is true: salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. Every day we live brings us one day closer to meeting Jesus face to face, and then he will ask us to account for what we've done with all the gifts he's given us. He will ask, not for his information, but for ours. Jesus already knows what we're doing with our lives, but he wants us to see as clearly as he already sees.

So by all means, let's get ready for Christmas this season, with all the activities that go into preparing for the holiday, as we look forward to being with family and friends.

But in the meantime, let's also get ready for the infinitely greater event that will surely happen in days to come. Let's get ready, not only for Christmas, but for the coming of Christ himself.



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