

Ready or Not, Here He Comes?  
Matthew 24: 36-42

Religious experts tell us that we shouldn't sing Christmas songs during Advent. Advent is about preparing for what is to come, Christmas is about celebrating what has already happened: the birth of Jesus. The only problem is, that there are only two decent Advent Hymns. The first is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and the second one I haven't discovered yet.

So, without apology, the Christmas songs have begun. For after all, no matter what season we are in, no matter what material, physical, or spiritual condition we might be in, we live with certain truths: that Jesus was born into our world and that Jesus is risen from the dead. Of course if we take this thinking too far, then we could end up singing Christmas carols in July. Well, maybe we should come to think of it! Now, on to the sermon.

What does it mean actually to believe in the Second Coming? How should this belief, expressed everywhere from the Nicene Creed to the latest Tim LaHaye book influence our lives?

It's a complicated subject, to be sure in general, and specifically in our Scripture this

morning. In the verses before our Scripture Lesson, Jesus has said that the return of the Son of Man will come before this, his generation, the generation to which he was preaching, has passed way. Now, of course, this presents a problem, because we are now many generations into the future.

Some Christians solve the problem by saying that in fact Jesus has already come again, in power, at the Resurrection. That is, we no longer need to speculate about a future return, because it has already been accomplished. And all the talk about wars and earthquakes is just symbolic language to describe the present situation in the Roman Empire in which Jesus lived.

Others have solved the problem by saying no, "generation" is to be understood loosely, as meaning the world being the way it is, with sun rising and setting at certain times and all the stars in their places. So, we are still, as it were, living in Jesus' generation.

Yet one way or another, almost every main Christian thought-system says that yes, history is moving to a God-graced conclusion, which will be marked by Jesus' return.

Some folks have a violent sort of view at the state of things before Jesus returns. Using the imagery from Revelation and elsewhere, they offer a dire and dark sort of scenario,

especially popular in recent history, and understandably so, given the threat of nuclear weapons and terror. It's a pessimistic vision of a world under the total control of the devil.

Those who do not hold to such a view, ask "well, what about the role of the Holy Spirit? The counselor, the guide? Surely God is still at work in the world." These folk reject the pessimistic, road-map view of the end of the world found in Revelation and say, folks who believe this way fail to account for the very real working of the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit moves where it will, then the future, while ultimately in God's hands remains mysteriously unknown to us. Yet ultimately in God's hands.

And, this more gentle view of the future of the world is found in passages from Isaiah in which wolf and lamb shall dwell together in peace, when we shall learn war no more, and from Jesus' image of the Kingdom as a big, almost friendly shrub, in which even all the birds of the air find comfort and refuge. This more hopeful, if you will, view of the future return of Jesus is echoed in the final stanza of our previous hymn: *For, lo! The days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old, when with the ever circling years shall come the time foretold when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.*

The more optimistic view of the future is that at Christmas God forever changed his

relationship with the earth and ours with him, that Bethlehem and angels and shepherds were the start of something quite wondrous.

In any case, folks, there are different ways for Christians to view the future and to understand what it means.

But as I read the Scripture today, Christians on both sides of the “last-days” debate, if you will are challenged. Those who believe these are the very last days are told not to speculate so much, and folks like me, who have a vision of the future that includes perhaps having grandchildren and great grandchildren and history unfolding for thousands of more years are told: *be awake! Don't turn your faith into habit. Be aware, be aware of what God is calling you to do.*

Now, turning to our Scripture more directly: I am amazed that so many Christians spend so much time trying to determine the exact moment, or even just the year of Jesus' return, when Scripture clearly quotes Jesus: “But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels or heaven, or the Son, but only the Father.”

Actually, we are dissuaded from even trying to interpret events. There have always been fortune tellers. Some have used crystal balls, others tea leaves, other goat entrails. Many

folks now use the Bible as if it itself is a fortune teller. Now such efforts might prove to be correct. It could well be that the folks to whom Revelation was written a hundred years or less after Jesus' resurrection claimed this Book as Scripture because they thought it said something very important about 1900 years in the future.

But against this thinking are Jesus' words that His return will still come as a complete surprise. He invites us to reconsider how it was in the days of Noah. Jesus is not talking about how evil the days were then, but rather, how ordinary. Folks were eating, and drinking (alcohol is not implied here), marrying and giving in marriage, and knew nothing of what was about to happen until here came the flood.

He then talks about how two will be in the field. One will be taken and one will be left. Many take this as a reference to believers being taken up into heaven, but it need not, and perhaps best not, be taken that way. Who does the taking? Could it be that those taken are those who are arrested and carried off by persecuting authorities?

After all, elsewhere the clear teaching of Jesus, when he speaks of taking up our cross, and daily, is that to be Christian is to be called to face the forces of evil head-on in a faithful and sacrificial way, not to hope for, or wait for, an escape.

So, where does all this leave us?

It leaves us with waiting, and responding. Waiting to hear what God would have us to do as individuals and as a church. Listening to the Spirit's call, if you will.

And then responding. Responding as people who believe that through the birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we are partners with God in bringing forth help, and mercy, and justice.

We are to keep awake. That is, awake in our faith, expecting God to lead us in his paths. That's the gift folks who believe we are living in the last days give to us: they remind us that there is an urgency about our calling as Christian men and women.

In our world today, there simply isn't time for us to be dull in our faith, or complacent. One challenge we Christians face is that many of us are really rather content with the way things are. We are not vitally engaged in seeking to transform our culture.

However, the next chapter of Matthew reminds us of what we are to be about: "to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, welcome the stranger." Romans 13 talks about Christian conduct more in terms of personal conduct: 13 *Let us behave*

*decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

Be awake. That's the challenge for today. But not so much, be awake and alert for his sudden return, but rather, be awake and alert in living as his disciple in the meantime.

*And, be awake and alert to see the signs of God's ongoing activity.* Whether he comes tomorrow or in two million years, may we know that today, today, God is at work within us, through us, among us. I visited in the jail last Friday with a young man who seemed to be a "lost cause," as I had worked with him for the past year. But now, he is taking faith seriously. He has a plan for what to do when he gets out in late January. And what sparked this change was a cross that another inmate made out of, of all things, a sock. When that cross showed up on his dinner tray, he said, "For the first time I felt as if God had something to do with me."

Let's never lose sight that God IS working in the midst of our world, in the midst of our lives. . . whatever we might believe about the return of Jesus.

So here we are. Advent. Looking forward to God's decisive action in bringing history to

a close. And looking backwards to Christmas to God's decisive action in the birth of Jesus Christ. And Scripture tells us: don't just look. Don't just speculate. Respond.

I quoted the final verse of our previous hymn earlier. So now I quote the final verse of our final hymn to wrap this up. The words are from the poet Christina Rossetti: *What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a Wise Man I would do my part; yet what I can I give him: give my heart.*

The center of faith is not speculation of one sort or another. It is in responding. Will you give your heart again to Jesus this day?