



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 20, 2007
Midweek Advent Worship
Daniel 12:1-3
Pastor Randy Ott

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 2:12-22
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 16

Jesus' Return

Every year the end of the church year focuses on the end of the world. Now we've started, in the last 10 years or so, with a season called "End Time," but even before that, when it was just the end of the Sundays after Pentecost, the last few weeks always focused on the end of the world, Christ's Second Coming and Judgment. Then we would be told it's the start of a new church year, the first Sunday in Advent. And what is the first Sunday in Advent always focused on? Christ's second return and the end of the world and his coming to judge the living and the dead—the same exact thing that the end of the church year focused on. Did you ever think to yourself, why do we start a new church year? It sounds like the exact same thing. This doesn't make any sense. Why aren't we doing something different? Or did you just not even notice? It might seem kind of odd.

I remember in our pastors study group in Minnesota, there was one pastor every year that would complain about it and would say, "Why are we doing this? We just talked about this." I don't know, but when you stop and think about it, the church is supposed to be the voice of God on earth, as we said last week. That's why we repeat John's call to repentance in the season of Advent even though it is close to Christmas. We need to repent because we are reminded why Christ had to come at Christmas. But as the church seeks to speak the voice of the Savior, the voice of our God, it's interesting to see how God talks about his coming into this world—the first coming.

Maybe during the Advent season, maybe sometime along the line you said to yourself, "It's Advent. I think I am just going to dig out a list of the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Savior and I am going to read through them in their chapters and where they are in the Old Testament." If you've ever undertaken that study, which is an interesting study, one of the things that begins to jump out at you fairly soon is that so often in the Old Testament when the Triune God had the prophets write about the coming of the Messiah, the time when Jesus would be born, the prophets speak of it in the context of Christ being born, the New Testament Era, and the end of the world as though its all one event. It happens quite often. In the readings in Isaiah where it talks about that feast on God's holy mountain, it goes from the end of the world to Christ coming into the world at Bethlehem, to the end of the world again, and it just moves back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and you might wonder what God is doing and if he is confused.

To God, when he spoke through those prophets, he was revealing bits and pieces, but he wanted them to know this is an accomplished event—the coming of the Messiah not

only is accomplished, but why he came. He came to live and die in our place because we are filthy rotten sinners. That also was accomplished. And since that was accomplished, that wouldn't be the end of everything. The day would come when the Messiah would return—not in humility, not barely making a ripple like an Olympic-class diver, but this time its going to be a huge cannonball when he comes at the end of the world with the Archangel Michael and he comes in all of his glory and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. There is no Second Coming of Christ. There is no need for you and me to celebrate the first coming of Christ. If he doesn't come at the end of the world to take those who are his own, body and soul, to live forever with him in heaven, then what is the point of celebrating his first coming? Then we might as well tear down our Christmas trees and put up a Festivus pole because that's all the meaning it would have. Then we wouldn't need to celebrate that God became flesh, because he wouldn't be God. We wouldn't have to focus our hearts on this incredible truth that God loved us enough to leave heaven and become one of us and to live and die in our place because if he isn't coming back to take us to heaven, he didn't do it.

We celebrate the Second Coming, we focus on his Second Coming to prepare ourselves for his first coming, celebrating his first coming in time, in Bethlehem, because we want to be reminded why he came in time and that is so that everything would be prepared for his Second Coming—when he comes to take us out of the veil of tears, when he comes to raise the dead, when he comes to give us our ultimate victory.

That's why the Second Coming, the end of the world, is a necessary part of Advent, because it tells us what Advent is all about—preparing for Christ.

If you look at the words of Daniel here, Daniel painted a lot of ugly, scary pictures; pictures that would make your knees knock even more than a horror movie if you were serious about looking at them and contemplating them. In the chapter right before what we read, he talked about the picture of the anti-Christ. The anti-Christ was going to come and he was going to cause upheaval. He was going to cause terrible things to happen within the church, and it was going to be such a bad thing that even the elect would be lost if that were possible. He repeats that at the beginning of chapter 12; we just heard that. At that time, there is going to be a time of distress like none would ever see. Jesus himself quotes these words when he talks about what the end of the world would be like, in Matthew 24 and 25.

But notice that our God doesn't leave us hanging with the fact that it is going to awful, it is going to be distress, it is going to be frightening, and it is going to be scary. That's not where he leaves us. He says, "But at that time, Michael the Archangel, who protects your people, will arise." At that time, your people—now who are his people?—everyone whose name is found written in the Book of Life. Your people will be delivered. How are they going to be delivered? Those who are dead are going to wake up and those who have their name written in the Book of Life, those who are God's people, will rise to everlasting life, but those who had more important things to do in this world than to know the Christ they had heard of, those who had other things choke out that Word of God from their lives, they will rise to shame and everlasting contempt because they will be lost forever. This is the reality that our God speaks for us. But we who are his people, we who know him as Lord and Savior, not only as Savior but also

Lord of our lives—that we live for him and that our faith shows in how we live—it changes us and affects us. We don't have to be frightened. We don't have to read these events that are going to come at the end of time, whether it's in the gospels or whether it's in Daniel or whether it's in Isaiah. We don't have to read about it and get scared. We don't have to have our knees knock because we've seen the end of the story. We will be delivered.

We are kind of strange people at times. Did you ever know anyone that tapes a football game or basketball game or baseball game, some kind of sporting event on T.V., and then they work so hard all day long not hear about it because they know they aren't going to be able to watch it and they tell everyone not to tell them what happened because they haven't watched the outcome yet and they don't want it ruined for themselves. Evidently if you watch that game and you know the outcome, it won't be interesting to watch at all. Think about how we twist that around sometimes. If you know that you're team won, it should take all of the anxiety out of seeing the other team advance and score and take the lead, shouldn't it? If you knew already that your team won, you wouldn't have to worry so much.

Think about why God tells us to focus on the Second Coming. He is telling us, "Don't worry. I won for you." All those things in life that you worry about—when you are in the middle of the worries about health, about relationships, about work, about finances, about loved ones, about this or about that—you don't have to run around like a chicken with your head cut off chasing after this self-help book or that self-help book or how to do this or how to do that. First of all, start with "don't worry. I've won. This can't separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. This can't hurt me. It can make my life difficult. It can make my life challenging, but it can't hurt me eternally." Think of how often in your life, and I can think how often in my life, that we are in the midst of worries and anxieties and we know God has ultimately won and God will be with us and he has promised all these things and yet, we still spend so much time worrying. Do you find yourself doing that? Do you stop in the middle of your worries and sit down and think, "You know what? Christ is going to come and I'm going to heaven, so ultimately the worst this can do is make my life uncomfortable. It can't send me to hell." If you think that is just pie in the sky by and by, go back to last week and look at why we need to repent again. We are filthy rotten sinners. We don't deserve this from God. We have no claim on God for a worry-free life. We have no claim on God for heaven itself except that he says to you, "Here. I'm putting this faith in your heart because I want you to have a claim on eternal life."

That is how our God speaks to us. He tells us about the Second Coming so that we will have tangible confidence and comfort in the midst of the crummy things of life. Hang on to it. Yes, you know the outcome, but isn't that great?! Isn't that the point? You know the outcome!

Then our God reminds us that he tells us about the Second Coming not only so that we can be comforted, but also so that we can let others know. He says those who are wise, those who know this, those who believe that Jesus has taken away their sins, even their sins of worry and their sins of doubt of God's love, those sins have been washed away in Christ. Those who are wise know that. And "those who are wise will

shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”

Think about that. We are like the stars of the heavens. We are like the sun. We have to shine. It's the nature of the sun to shine, right? I don't know if you ever heard a pretty interesting song that tells you that the sun is a mass of incandescent gas, a gigantic nuclear furnace where hydrogen is turned into helium at a temperature of millions of degrees. It's the nature of the sun to do that. It's the nature of the sun to shine. And in the same way, those who are wise who know that we have the victory, it's our nature to shine. It's our nature to reflect this truth to others, to tell others, to build ourselves up in it, to build our family up in it, to build our fellow believers up in it, and then to shine the brightness of this light to those who are living in the land of darkness in the shadow of death. We are God's lights.

We get to tell others, “You don't have to worry. You can trust God. Trust God and he will help you. Trust God and he will tell you that the victory has already been won. Trust God and he will put the things that worry us in a whole new perspective so that we can see that ultimately our greatest battle has been won. Our enemy has nothing left. He's been defeated through and through, completely and absolutely.” When we are wise, we will lead many to righteousness and we will shine like the stars for ever and ever. That's our nature.

When we are at our best and strong in our faith, that's what we do. When we are weak and we rely on ourselves, when we focus on what we can see, we flicker a little bit, don't we? But God has enabled each and every one of us to be a bright gleaming spotlight that pierces through the night sky of people's worries and anxieties; that pierces through the night sky of all those loved ones we know that are going to hell because they don't believe in Jesus. You and I are the search light that God has put into their world so they can know that their name is in the Book of Life because Jesus lived and died in their place.

The Second Coming isn't just a necessity for Advent. It's a necessity for every day of our life as we face life's challenges and life's opportunities.