

What Are We Waiting For? 2nd Weekend of Advent – December 9/10, 2006 Sermon Background Study

2 Peter 3:8-15a (*The Message*)

⁸⁻⁹Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change.

¹⁰But when the Day of God's Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment.

¹¹⁻¹³Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but *we'll* hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶So, my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. Interpret our Master's patient restraint for what it is: salvation.

Advent is the time we prepare ourselves for Christ's coming. We usually think of this as preparing for Christmas. But today's Scripture passage reminds us that we are also preparing for Jesus' return.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a telephone survey of more than 2000 American adults last August.¹ Among the variety of topics explored, the researchers asked people for their beliefs about Jesus' second coming.

20% of those who identified themselves as Christian said they do not believe that Jesus will return, which leaves me wondering what they do believe.² Another 20% believe that Jesus will return in their lifetime. Which leaves 60% of Christians who expect that Jesus will come again but don't think it is imminent. Based on today's passage from 2 Peter, it seems that all three camps were represented in the first century as well.

First, Peter warns the believers about "scoffers" who deny that Jesus will ever return (3:4). Second, Peter cautions against expecting Jesus' imminent return – after all, a thousand years for us is like a day for God, who is patient beyond our imagining. Besides, as Jesus also cautioned, the day of the Lord will come like a thief (see Matt. 24:43-44). It seems the more sure we are that the times are ripe for Jesus' second coming, the less likely they actually are. Those who think that Jesus will return in their lifetimes are likely to be disappointed. Which leaves us with our confident hope in the parousia but without any

The Parousia

"Parousia" (pronounced puh-roo'zhee-uh) is a Greek word meaning "coming," "arrival," or even simply "being actively present;" i.e., in person. Paul uses the word in the sense of active presence when he speaks of his own weak bodily presence in 2 Corinthians 10:10. Thus, we could speak of Jesus' second presence, just as we speak of his second coming.

"Parousia" is most often used in the New Testament to give expression to the Christian claim that Jesus will one day return and be present as he was once present (see for example, Matt. 24:3; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Thess 2:1; James 5:7-8; and from today's passage, 2 Peter 3:12). Often, you'll find "parousia" used to connote the entire bundle of expectations around Jesus' return, including the resurrection of the dead, the final judgement, the new heavens and new earth, and so on.

Nearly all the New Testament writings speak of Jesus' return. Sometimes the writer seems to expect Jesus' return any day. Others, like the writer of 2 Peter, are confident of Jesus' return but cautious about the timing. But all the writers, including the Gospel writers, emphasize the ethical imperative to be ready by living holy lives and building for God's kingdom.

¹You can find an interesting summary of the survey results on-line at www.pewforum.org. Click on "surveys." The survey is titled "Many Americans Uneasy with mix of Religion and Politics," August 24, 2006. You can also download a pdf of the full survey report from the summary page.

²The parousia (see the text box above) is well-attested across the entire New Testament and is part of the Apostles Creed. The fact that one out of five Christians say they don't believe in Jesus' return illustrates the need for strong biblical teaching in our churches. Christians might disagree about the circumstances or timing of Jesus' return, but the claim that Jesus will come again is the great Christian hope and, frankly, is something that most Christians for most of the last two thousand years have not disagreed about.

confidence in our ability to predict its timing.³ We may not know when, but we sure know that it is going to be big – just as big as Jesus’ first arrival 2,000 years ago.

The Day of God

Peterson renders v. 10 in this way: “But when the Day of God’s Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment.” Peter comes back to these dramatic images two verses later: “Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day.” What gives? Is this about the destruction of the universe at the end of time? Is the earth going to go up like some sort of roman candle when Jesus returns?

In a word – no. This sort of imagery is a typically Jewish way of speaking of the great day when God would come in judgment and salvation, sweeping away all that has been distorted by sin and ushering in God’s new creation. You might read Peter’s speech on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, where he quotes from the prophet Joel about the “last days.” Peter grasps that with the coming of Christ and the outpouring of God’s Spirit, the long-awaited Day of God had come *already*, but had *not yet*⁴ reached its final consummation – that would await Jesus’ return. The startling and even frightening apocalyptic word imagery is a way of investing events with their cosmic significance. Even in this season, Peter’s language can help us to embrace the “bigness” of Christmas.

What are we waiting for?

Given all this, in their God-inspired wisdom, Peter, Paul, and the other NT authors urge the Christians to move forward with their lives even as they eagerly await Jesus’ return. But they don’t stop there. They also insist that the believers strive, as Peter puts it, “to be found living at your best, in purity and peace.” Found by whom? Jesus, of course. We sometimes joke about it, but there could hardly be better advice

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than to live one’s life as if Christ might return in the next moment, to be ready always.

Rather than concerning themselves with the timing or the details of Christ’s coming, the believers are to live righteously now, reflecting the righteousness of the new heavens and the new earth. In other words, *we can live now as we will live then*. We can love now. We can encourage now. We can be patient and kind now, joyful and forgiving now.

Really, why not start now? What are we waiting for?

Before Jesus left the first time, he promised that God would send another, a Comforter and Helper, who would empower us to live at our best. Perhaps our problem doesn’t lie with God’s promises of God’s Spirit, but in our own approach to life. Are we really doing our part? How can we find the joyful, loving, abundant life that God seeks for us? We’ll talk more about this in January, but perhaps we can begin now, during Advent, to strive purposefully for the transformed life that is ours *already*, but *not yet*.

³Some NT passages state flatly that there will be no signs of Jesus’ return (Mark 8:12; Luke 17:20-21). Other passages warn believers to be ready (Matt. 24:43-44; Luke 12:35-40). This is all complicated by the likelihood that some passages we tend to read as being about Jesus’ second coming are actually about the arrival of the kingdom of God and Jesus’ vindication, esp. with regard to the destruction of the temple four decades later (see Matthew 24 and Luke 21:25-33).

⁴Yet again we come to the importance of grasping the already/not yet reality of God’s kingdom. I’ve pretty well come to the conclusion that this *already/not yet* perspective is one of the least-understood yet most important concepts in New Testament theology. Coming to understand the truth that God’s kingdom has already arrived while we still await its full consummation has opened up vast portions of the New Testament to me that were only nice-sounding sentimental platitudes before. My January 29, 2003, Background Study, “New Creation,” will help you understand this. It even has pictures. You can find it at www.standrewacademy.org, where all 230+ studies are posted, as well as a lot of other materials.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

December 10-16

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Zechariah 4-6; Isaiah 50 Isaiah 50:4-11 is the third of Second Isaiah's servant songs. It is about the servant's humiliation and vindication.</p>	<p>Monday Zechariah 7-9; Isaiah 51 Zech. 9:9 begins a passage about the coming ruler of God's people. You will recognize it as a Palm Sunday passage.</p>
<p>Tuesday Zechariah 10-12; Isaiah 52 Isaiah 52:13 begins the last of Isaiah's servant songs. It is the most moving and the most striking in the light of Christ.</p>	<p>Wednesday Zechariah 13-14; Isaiah 53 This chapter of Isaiah is like a mini-resume of Jesus, his ministry, and death. It isn't hard to imagine a young Jesus finding here the heart of the vocation given him by his Father.</p>
<p>Thursday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Friday Malachi 1-2; Isaiah 54 Early Christians placed Malachi at the end of the OT because it is focused on the coming messenger of the Day of the Lord.</p>
<p>Saturday Malachi 3-4; Isaiah 55 This chapter from Isaiah is God's invitation to an abundant life - the life we've always wanted!</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

December Book Recommendation

Eat This Book, by Eugene Peterson

It is good to read the Bible, but the way we read it is just as important. Peterson guides us forward in the art of spiritual reading. The book's title is taken from three biblical passages in which a prophet is told eat God's Word (Revelation 10:9-10; Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 2:8-3:30). They are not just to read or hear God's Word, or just understand it, or even just apply it. These people are to eat Scripture, to take it inside themselves so it gets into every part of their person and being. Beginning in January, I invite you to begin growling over Scripture with me, learning to read with our hearts as well as our heads. We'll go through selected books, reading one story or one key passage each day. It is my hope that we'll learn how to ingest the story and keep it with us throughout the day, living with God's Word and letting it work within us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are your own expectations of Jesus' return? Which of the three camps do you fall in? Jesus won't return? In your lifetime? Other? How do your expectations of Jesus' second coming affect your life today? Your beliefs about God? The world? Yourself?
2. The Apostles Creed affirms Jesus' return: "from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead." What is your reaction to this? Sometimes we want to imagine that judgment has nothing to do with love, when the truth is that without judgment, morality is a sham. Across the Bible, salvation and judgment are always paired up. It isn't so much the fact of judgment that ought to concern us as it is the judge. What sort of judge will Jesus be? What do you think it means to judge in love? What is the place of grace in this? Is it, as Bonhoeffer said, cheap grace or costly grace?
3. It seems so simple: "be found living at your best, in purity and peace." In January, we are going to talk about being truly transformed - not just trying to live at our best, but actually training to do it. For now, what do you think are some keys to transformed living? What is God's part in this? What is our own?