

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 28, 2021**

**COMING AGAIN  
Titus 2:11-14**

Most of you, I'm sure, know the story well. In Charles Dickens' famous *A Christmas Carol*, first published in 1843, Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserable miser who makes everyone around him miserable. Both his name – “Scrooge” – and his signature expression – “Bah humbug!” – are synonymous with the absence of the Christmas spirit. On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, and then, successively, by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come. As a result of these visions, Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning a changed man. No longer is he the selfish, greedy, rude, and lonely old man everyone knew him to be. He has become, overnight, generous, kind, and benevolent, caring genuinely for others and their wellbeing, especially the family of Bob Cratchit and Cratchit's disabled son, Tiny Tim.

The transformation in Scrooge's life was truly remarkable. At the very end, Dickens writes: “Ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any (person) alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, ‘God bless us, every one!’” (Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*)

I'm not interested in the “ghosts” of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come who visited Scrooge while he slept. I do, however, want you to see that Christmas has these three dimensions, each of which is important to a biblical perspective on Christmas. We must never lose sight of Christmas Past – that is, the first Christmas when the Son of God took on our flesh and blood and was born in the little town of Bethlehem, having come on a mission from God the Father to save us from our sins. Nor should we ever lose sight that Jesus is the reason for the season in our celebrations of Christmas (in the) Present. Then, third, we must also keep our eye on the promise of Christmas Yet to Come, when the Savior whose first advent (coming) at Christmas returns to bring the redemptive plan of God to final fulfillment.

**CHRISTMAS YET TO COME**

This morning, as we begin the season of Advent, I want you to think with me about the promise of Christmas Future, when Jesus returns. Advent has a double focus (even triple if you will). We look back to the first Christmas – Christmas Past – to remember the coming of Jesus our Savior, when, as Paul writes in Titus 2:11, “The grace of God that brings salvation appeared” in the incarnation of God's Son. The word “appeared” is the Greek verb *epiphaino*, from which we get the word “epiphany.” Paul uses the same word in Titus 3:4, where he says of Jesus' first coming: “When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared (*epiphaino*), He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy” (3:4-5). This, my friends, is the gospel by which we are

saved, the good news by which we are made right with God. This is the grace that proceeds from the first coming of Jesus to us – from His miraculous conception and virgin birth, His sinless life, His preaching and teaching and healing, His suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead. All these things flow from Christmas Past.

We also look forward to the biblical promise of His coming again – Christmas Future – so that, as Paul says, we may “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives” (2:12) in the present, lives of faithfulness, joy, lovingkindness, perseverance in the gospel, and service to God “while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing (*epiphaneia*) of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (2:13).

The second Advent – the promise of Jesus’ coming again – is not an optional add-on to our faith. It is an essential tenet of the Christian faith. In the *Essentials of Our Faith* in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church we affirm: “Jesus Christ will come again to the earth – personally, visibly, and bodily – to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate” (that is, to bring to completion) “history and the eternal plan of God.” For nearly 2,000 years, Christians have professed in *The Apostles’ Creed* our belief that Jesus was:

... conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried.  
He descended into hell.  
On the third day He rose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven and  
sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty  
(the place of supreme honor and exaltation in God’s Kingdom)  
from which *He shall come*  
to judge the living and the dead.  
(*Italics added.*)

## **MYSTERY**

There is an element of mystery surrounding the promise of Christ’s return. The Bible says plainly that the timing of Jesus’ return is a secret. It is that way by God’s design. Jesus said so Himself in Matthew 24:36: “No one knows about that day or hour (of His coming), not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” *When Jesus will return is a mystery. It is one of the “secret things” that belong to God and God alone (Deuteronomy 29:29). That He will return is the promise of Jesus Himself and the teaching of the New Testament.*

Max Lucado has written that for Christians, the return of Christ is not a riddle to be solved or a code to be broken, but rather a day to be anticipated (Lucado, *When Christ Comes*, 5). Which begs the question: Is the second Advent, the promised return of the Lord Jesus, something you look forward to with anticipation, with hope and joy?

## **WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS**

If you're not sure about it, consider what the Bible itself says about Christ's return. According to James Boice, one out of every 25 verses in the New Testament deals with the return of Christ in one way or another. It is mentioned more than 300 times (318) in the 260 chapters of the New Testament. Every New Testament book with the exceptions of Galatians and the short letters of Philemon, and 2 and 3 John include some reference to it (Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 705).

Jesus spoke of His coming again quite often. Here is Mark 8:38: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful times, I, the Son of Man, will be ashamed of that person when I return in the glory of my Father with the holy angels" (NLT).

In Mark 13:26, Jesus speaks of the day of His return and says that "everyone will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds with great power and glory" (NLT).

In John 14:3, in the Upper Room on the night before His crucifixion, He said to His disciples: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am."

It is not just Jesus who speaks of His coming again.

The apostle Paul says that the sacrament of the Lord's supper, which Jesus established in the Upper Room that same night, points beyond the death of Jesus to His promised return: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup," says Paul, "you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

In Acts 1:11, following the ascension of Jesus into heaven 40 days after His resurrection, two messengers from God appear to the disciples of Jesus and tell them that "this same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven."

In Philippians 3:20, Paul declares that "our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."

The promised return of Jesus is a major theme – *the* major theme – of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. In 1:9-10, he speaks of how the Thessalonian Christians "turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" of God. In 4:16, he announces that "The Lord (Jesus) Himself will come down from heaven" as the culminating event in all of history. In 5:23, he pronounces this benediction on the Thessalonians: "May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body" (i.e., your whole being) "be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In a similar vein, Paul speaks in 2 Thessalonians 1:10 of “the day (the Lord Jesus) comes to be glorified in His holy temple and to be marveled at among all who have believed” in Him. What an incredible day that will be for all of us who belong to Him!

In 1 Timothy 6, Paul gives a charge to his disciple Timothy, which Timothy is to carry out “until the appearing (*epiphaneia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in His own time” (6:14-15).

As we have already seen, here in Titus 2, Paul talks about how we are to live and the kind of people we are to be “while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing (*epiphaneia*) of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (2:13).

Hebrews 9:26-28 says that Jesus “appeared (*phaneroo*) once for all ... to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Just as each of us is destined to die once, and after that to face (God’s) judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. And He will appear (*optomai*) a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.”

The apostle John speaks of the certainty of Christ’s return in Revelation 1:7:

“Look, He (Jesus) is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see Him,  
even those who pierced Him;  
and all the peoples of the earth  
will mourn because of Him.”

That’s how it will be. For those who belong to Jesus and are waiting for His return, it will be a day of unspeakable joy. For those who reject Him, who resist His grace, who live in rebellion against Him, it will not be a happy day. It will be a day of great mourning, as they realize the consequences of their refusal to believe the gospel and to follow Jesus.

Because it is so clear, so pervasive, and so central to the message of the New Testament, we affirm it as one of the essentials of our faith: *Jesus. Is. Coming. Again.* The Christ of Christmas Past is the Lord of Christmas Yet to Come.

## **WHEN**

We do not know when Jesus will return. It could be any day, or any moment. Or it may be some time off in the distance, perhaps in our lifetimes, or perhaps not. Though we don’t know when it will be, one thing we do know is that every day that passes brings us one day closer to the day of His return.

When Jesus does return, the Bible says that for those who are not ready, it will be like a thief in the night, like a burglar who breaks into your home suddenly and without warning (1 Thessalonians 5:2). It will be as sudden as labor pains when it is time to give

birth to a baby. Sometimes those labor pains come when you're not expecting them (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Jesus says it will be like it was back in the days of Noah when God sent the great flood. Right up to the day Noah and his family entered the ark, until the day it began to rain, life went on as usual. People went about their ordinary pursuits as though life would go on like this forever.

They went to work (or worked remotely from home). They went shopping. They took their kids to soccer and basketball, to music lessons and doctors' appointments. They watched TV. They spent hours on social media. All without giving much thought to what God wanted or to what the future might hold. They were living for the moment. And they weren't prepared for what God was going to do.

They weren't ready when judgment time came. God gave them plenty of time to repent, plenty of time to get right with Him. But they weren't ready when the rains fell and the flood waters rose and their lives were snuffed out.

What will it be like when Jesus returns? It will be unexpected for those who are not ready and alert.

What will it be like? It will be good news for some and bad news for others. For some, it will be a day of great celebration like no other. For others, it will be a time of horror, of fear and mourning.

It will be a happy day for those of us who belong to Jesus, who are the recipients of His amazing grace. For those who have said "No" to His grace, it will not be a happy day. Either way, it will be unavoidable.

### **HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?**

Since Jesus is coming again, what should we do to be ready for His return? If it could happen at any moment, how should we live so that we are prepared for it?

The doctrine of Christ's return isn't just "pie in the sky, by and by." It is immensely practical, with implications for life here and now.

How then should we live? Let me very quickly suggest four things.

### **OPEN YOUR HEART TO JESUS.**

The first thing to do, if you've never done it, is to open the door of your heart to Jesus by faith right now to receive Him as the Savior and Lord of your life. Even today, as it says in Revelation 3:20, Jesus is standing outside the door of your heart, knocking. If you hear His voice speaking to you, open the door and let Him in. Let Him make His home in your heart. You will not regret it.

If you have never said “Yes” to Jesus, do it today, while there is opportunity. The Bible says that today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2), and “to all who receive Him, to those who believe in His name, He gives the right to become children of God” (John 1:12) – born anew by the grace and power of Jesus.

The only way to be ready for Jesus when He comes again is to make your heart His home.

### **SET YOUR MIND AND HEART ON THINGS ABOVE.**

Second, to be ready when Jesus comes, take to heart these words from Colossians 3:1-4: “Since you have been raised with Christ [made alive in Him], set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died (to the world), and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears (*phaneroo*), you also will appear (*phaneroo*) with Him in glory.”

For most of us, this involves a paradigm shift, a new way of thinking and seeing that results in a new way of living.

You know how easy it is to become so immersed in the concerns, desires, and pursuits of the world that you lose sight of what is eternal. At this time of year, you know how easy it is to get wrapped up in all the “to-dos” of the Christmas season that you are in danger of neglecting or even forgetting the Savior at the center of Christmas.

Set your mind and heart on things above. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

### **LIVE A GODLY LIFE.**

The third thing to do to be ready when Jesus comes is, as Paul writes to Titus, to “say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly live in this present age, while (you) wait for the blessed hope” of Christ’s return (Titus 2:12-13).

In the trenches of our daily battles with sin, evil, and temptation, the promise of Christ’s coming again can give us encouragement to press on. It can spur us on to live “God-filled, God-honoring lives” (MSG). It can inspire us to live like believers and to take seriously the call to be holy, so that we will have no need to be embarrassed or ashamed when Jesus returns.

A little girl who learned about the coming again of Jesus in Sunday School asked her mother: “Mommy, do you believe Jesus will come back?”

“Yes.”

“Could He come this week?”

“Yes.”

“Today?”

“Yes.”

“Could He come in the next hour?”

“Yes.”

“In a few minutes?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Mommy. Would you comb my hair?”

She wanted to be sure she was ready.

### **WORK WHILE YOU WAIT.**

The fourth thing to do to be ready for Christmas Yet to Come is to work while you wait. To be engaged wholeheartedly in the Father’s business, “eager,” as Paul says in Titus 2:14, “to do what is good.”

Colonel Abraham Davenport was the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives during the Revolutionary War. On May 19, 1780, the sky above Hartford grew ominously dark and some members of the assembly, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. As some called for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said: “The day of judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.”

Like Colonel Davenport, may we be found doing our duty to the Lord when He comes. May we work while we wait, knowing, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58, that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Never, ever forget the events of Christmas Past, when Jesus took on our flesh and blood to save us from our sins. Never, ever forget the sure and certain hope of Christmas Yet to Come, when Jesus will return in glory and power. Remembering Christmas past, and with an eye to Christmas Yet to Come, may your Advent season and Christmas Present be filled with the love and joy of Jesus. As people who have been touched by His grace, may we live every moment of every day in joyful gratitude for His first coming and in joyful expectation of His coming again. And, as Tiny Tim so famously said: “God bless us, every one!”

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.