

Matthew 24:36-44

36 “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. 42 Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Today, I want to focus on the first Sunday of Advent, which centers on the triumphant return of Jesus, and then offer a few ways that might help us understand that return.

We begin today the season of Advent, which signifies the arrival of something significant, and this first Sunday of Advent is the first day of the Christian year, like New Year’s Day. It is a time for a fresh start, as we prepare for the birth of Christ and reflect on Christ’s return.

It’s an exciting time of year, and sometimes we can get overwhelmed by the rush toward Christmas. For most of us, the rush is driven by love; we want things to be perfect for those we love. But Advent requests that we slow down and savor the time as well, without missing the heart of what we are doing. It calls on us to appreciate all that we are doing to bring joy to our world.

What troubles many people about the first Sunday of Advent is that it is not about Christ’s birth but about his triumphant return, when God restores and reconciles all creation.

The text from Matthew for today sounds more like a reference to those old Left Behind Novels and other things associated with rapture. I can’t criticize the Left Behind Novels as I have never read them.

There are many problems with this, but chief among them is the idea that the redeemed are swept up for salvation, and those not swept up are left behind for destruction. Besides the fact that the rapture does not occur in the Bible, the point Jesus makes is that God is securing those left behind, like Noah, the worker in the field, and the woman grinding grain.

What Jesus wants is for people to watch and actively wait. For as Jesus says, no one knows the time when God will restore all things with the coming again of Jesus.

Matthew remembers Jesus’ teaching on patient watchfulness and wants to share it with his church because, some 50 years after Jesus, they were growing impatient and losing hope. They thought Jesus would return soon and could not understand why he didn’t.

Matthew reminds them and us that there is no predictable timetable; it will happen in God’s good time. And rather than despair, we are to live the faithful life Christ called us to do. Good advice then, good advice now.

So, the first Sunday of Advent is one of faithful living with the assurance that when the time is right, Christ will come and restore all things. How this will be and what it will look like only God, Jesus’s Father, knows.

Anna Carter Florence speaks of an English teacher who would assign books and stories and then tell the class how each ended. Some people still read the end first when it is a good mystery or thriller.

Anna’s teacher said, “Now that you know how it will end, you can focus on how it comes about and savor each step without rushing to the end.”

To me, that's like starting to read the Bible not with Genesis but with Revelation 21. Which, come to think of it, is not a bad idea.

And this is the part at the end that speaks to me

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them and be their God;

<sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

<sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

When we know how things end, we can read the Bible to see how God brings it all about. And everything that opposes God's will will be destroyed.

I'm not so big on the destruction part, but it is there.

The Bible is the story of God finishing what God started in the beginning.

And we live in between those times, between creation and consummation, and we live between the time when God sent Jesus to begin that process of restoration of Creation, and when it will come to fruition. Scholars call it living in the already but not yet. We live in the in-between times.

So, with all that as background. I want to share two ways of looking at the coming of Christ that may be helpful. On a podcast I listened to called Sermon Brainwave, they described it this way: Jesus comes in History, Mystery, and Majesty.

The History we know is the story of Jesus from birth to ascension. It begins with Mary and Joseph and the coming of Jesus Emanuel as God with us and ends with Jesus' return to the Father. In this, we get guidance on how we are to live from studying how he taught and lived.

Then Jesus comes in Mystery. That is both personal and social. It is personal as he comes to dwell in our hearts and relates to us through prayer, devotion, study, and loving service.

As Jesus taught in Matthew 25:31-40:

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 And the king will answer

them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

Every day we are called to meet Jesus in the mystery of his presence among us.

But it is also social, for these verses are building blocks of our active faith in Jesus as a church. Together, we can do so much more than we can alone as we work to structure our lives and our society in accordance with these teachings.

Daily, Jesus comes to us in these in-between times and offers us the opportunity to meet him.

And finally, that Jesus will one day return in Majesty and Glory as Matthew said at the beginning of the passage from Matthew 25 to judge all the nations, and those that follow him will hear 34 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Another way to understand the Second Coming of Christ, as Barbra Brown Taylor says, "It is not a second coming because Jesus comes again and again and again." An illustration of this that I have shared with you more than once is that I experienced a coming of Christ in my life on the birth of my grandson. I was at a place where this sign of hope made so much difference. Another instance is when I came to serve with you in this church, a new birth with the coming of Christ in my life through you.

I imagine you could name some such events in your life.

As we look at our lives, we can see the coming of Christ, and this experience in the in-between times is a preview of the new quality of life God will bring to all creation.

I tend to favor this view.

So, whether you take a literal or a more spiritual approach, talk like this sounds strange in a 21st-century world, and we know the church is shrinking all around us. It might make us more inviting if we gave up strange talk like this. But then we would give up an essential part of who we are, a part that keeps us working for peace, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and love, which are part of our core values, even if they are not in vogue.

We should stop worrying about the current state of things in the church and keep living by our values, because we know how the story ends. So, we will continue to choose Christ's values, as we trust and follow him, watching for his presence in our lives.