

Jesus Is Coming!

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois —December 20, 2015

Malachi 3:1-5 NIV

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.



*"Who can stand when he appears?
For he will be like a refiner's fire . . ."
— Malachi 3:2*

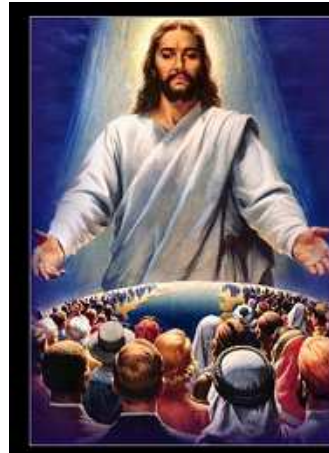
"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 NIV

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!



*"But our
citizenship is in
heaven. And
we eagerly
await a Savior
from there . . ."
— Philippians 3:20*

Romans 13:8-14

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Although we have our Christmas decorations up, and we've been singing Christmas carols during December, it's not really Christmas yet. Christmas doesn't begin till December 25, and it lasts twelve days —

as the familiar song says — until Epiphany, on January 6. So although we're celebrating today as Christmas Sunday, we're actually still in the season of Advent, which means "coming." Advent is the time of anticipating the coming of the Messiah — an anticipation that's echoed in the Scriptures that have just been read. The prophet Malachi warns, "Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come. . . . But who can endure the day of his coming?" And the apostle Paul reminds the Philippians, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ . . ." And in Romans 13 he states, "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."



Traditionally Advent is a penitential season, like Lent, when we confess our sins and ask forgiveness, in preparation for the appearance of the Lord — an appearance that will bring justice and deliverance for all who have faithfully served him. The Lord Jesus has already come, and done what the Father sent him to do: to institute the reconciliation of sinful humanity to its Creator. Advent is a time to look beyond what we might call that "first coming" to what's traditionally called the "Second Coming" of the Lord, the completion of that mission of Messiah Jesus. As the Letter to the Hebrews states, "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:28).

In his "first coming" (if we could call it that), the Savior was born in the stable of Bethlehem, walked the dusty paths of Galilee and Judea, proclaimed the coming rule of God, demonstrated that kingdom by healing the sick and demon-oppressed, went to the cross to expose sin for what it is, and rose again to inaugurate the renewed creation that has been God's plan all along — the purpose to which the Law and the Prophets of Israel have been testifying through the centuries. Christmas, and the events that follow like Epiphany, Palm Sunday, Easter, and Pentecost, all celebrate what happened during that "first coming" of the Lord — events that are decisive turning points in the history of the world. Today, as we anticipate that celebration, I thought it would be useful to review several ways in which the Lord Jesus "comes" to us in addition to, and as a result of, that "first coming" that we read about in the Gospels.

To begin with, let's discuss the "Second Coming." The possibility of the return of Jesus is on many people's minds today, especially in the light of world events that seem to promise a dark future unless the Lord intervenes to set things right. What people call "Bible prophecy," the prediction of "end-time events," can be a hot topic and sell a lot of books, films, and DVDs. Bible teachers use parts of the Gospels, like Mark 13 and Matthew 24, or the Book of Revelation, or other passages to develop their particular end-time scenario. Visiting another church recently, I heard a very detailed account of what's supposed to happen in the "end times" of the Second Coming. I'm not going to get into those details, for several reasons.

First, those details are subject to different ways of understanding them. I think when people first heard the Israelite prophets, or Jesus, or the apostle Paul, or the Revelation to John speaking about the coming of the Lord, they understood well enough what they were saying. But in our time we've lost the key to interpreting these things, because we live in a different culture. The Bible often speaks in dramatic word-pictures that



provide insight into unfolding events. But today, under the influence of the cultural worldview of scientific materialism, we try to interpret those word-pictures literally and they take on a different meaning.



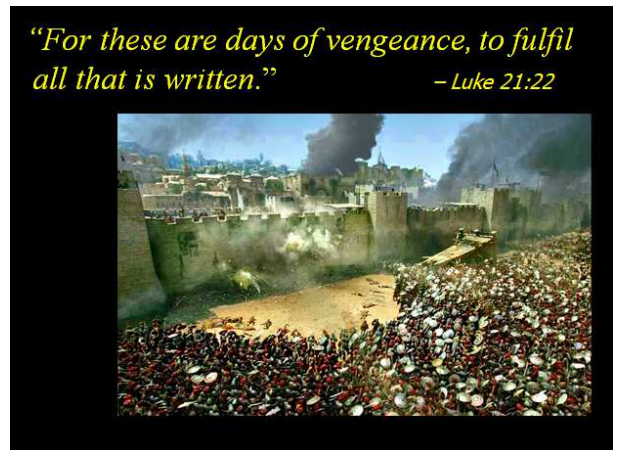
Let me give you an example. If we read in the Bible that stars will fall from heaven, or the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, we think the biblical writer is referring to astronomical or meteorological phenomena — as if the next line is going to be, “And the rest of the country will be partly sunny, with scattered showers in the evening.” But the biblical author is using dramatic language about heavenly bodies to describe events on the earthly scene. The prophets, for example, used language like that to describe the clash of world empires and the downfall of nations and their rulers. The Revelation borrows a lot of those images from the Israelite prophets to depict things happening in the first century when Christians were being persecuted by Jewish and Roman

authorities. Teachers who take that kind of vivid, dramatic language and turn it into a detailed scenario of end-time events are making a category mistake, and their explanations sometimes carry them into fantasyland. Let’s not make the mistake of turning deep Bible teaching into unbelievable science fiction.

End-time scenarios have to be constantly revised because history just seems to move on. The founders of the Adventist movement were absolutely certain the Lord would return in 1844; when that didn’t happen they had to adjust their teaching. The same thing is happening in our own time. In the 1980s someone published a book, *Eighty-eight Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1988*. Then, of course, they had to publish a sequel, *Eighty-nine Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1989*. And so it goes. Recently we’ve heard a lot of talk about the critical “blood moons” and what they meant for events in 2015. The “blood moons” have come and gone, and we’re not hearing much about them now.

The second reason I’m not going into details of the “Second Coming” is that much of what, in the Bible, looks like predictions of events in the distant future is really descriptive of events occurring, or about to occur, when the writers of the Bible were doing their work. Let me give a few examples. In Luke 21 we read Jesus’ words to his disciples: “By your endurance you will gain your lives. But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it; for these are days of vengeance, to fulfil all that is written” (21:19-22 RSV). What Jesus warned his disciples about took place in the year 70, when the Roman armies put down a Jewish revolt, destroyed Jerusalem, and burned its Temple. Thereafter, Jerusalem was devastated for centuries.

Or, in Revelation 18, we read about the coming judgment on the great city called Babylon, and how the merchants of the world are distressed because they won’t be able to sell their goods to the city any longer. Interpreters have puzzled over what this “Babylon” is; some have identified it as Rome, others as the Catholic Church, or some future world economic system. But if you look at the list of the things the merchants have been selling to the unfaithful city — gold, fine wood, spices, incense, oil, grain, cattle and sheep — these are items that went into the construction of the Temple of Jerusalem, or maintained its sacrificial rituals. (Recall that this Temple, begun by King Herod, was still under construction until around the beginning of the Jewish revolt in AD 66.) It looks to me like this “Babylon” John is talking about is Jerusalem, the city that was persecuting the saints. In the New Testament, most persecution of Christians doesn’t come from Roman



authorities, but from the Jerusalem religious authorities. So “the end of the age” the Gospels talk about isn’t always something yet to come in our day, but “the end” of the system that Jesus came to set right, the unfaithful religious establishment of that time.

About the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul wrote this to the Corinthians: these things “were written down for our instruction, *upon whom the end of the ages has come*” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Paul wrote this around the year 55, and if we take him seriously *that* time — not 2000 years later — was “the end of the ages.” So when encountering what people call “Bible prophecy” we need to ask, “Does this really apply to us today, or some time in the near future? Or did it apply to things happening in the environment of the people who first heard these words from Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles?” In Matthew 24 Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple, and his disciples ask him, “When will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” Those are two different questions. A working knowledge of events in the ancient world — especially the Jewish world — and what people were thinking at that time is a useful tool in trying to sort these things out.

In the third place, focusing on end-time events can be a diversion from our present mission as believers in the Lord. People who think the world is going to end tomorrow might be less likely to do what Jesus called his followers to do: to build toward the kingdom of God, bringing into reality in our world the new creation that Jesus launched when he rose from the dead. Jesus told his followers, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18), and taught us to pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it

is in heaven.” When God made this world he made it *good*, and he commanded people to “be fruitful and multiply” — to have dominion over the earth and exercise stewardship over what God has made, not to walk away from it thinking it’s all going to disappear in a flash. That’s why we, as a congregation, do the things we do: assist people through the Love Fund, host the Food Pantry, build homes in Mexico, support “One Family, One Purpose.” We await the appearance of our Savior and the new bodies we shall receive when he comes, but the scenario of that day may not be what some popular preachers and media make it out to be. Meanwhile we’re not deserting this world God has made, or failing to address its many needs.



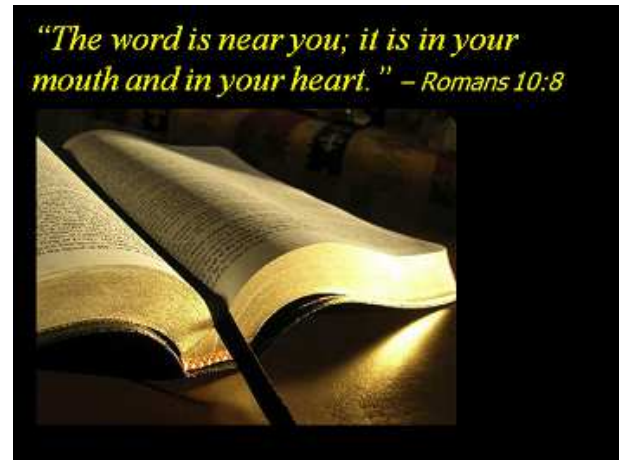
I’ve spent a lot of time on the question of the “end times,” but let’s briefly explore some more ways we experience the Advent of the Lord. I’ve touched upon one way already: we meet the Lord Jesus when we take part in the mission he assigned to us, to take his name and his blessing to those in need. Right now the question of what to do with the refugees from the war in Syria is a hot political issue in our nation, an issue of national security. Whatever you and I think about that, *what would we do* if a refugee family did come to live in our community? Would we turn our back on them, or would we befriend them — as different from us as they might be in their beliefs and customs? I believe we all know the answer to that question that’s consistent with the gospel of Jesus.

As his people we have his same mission to the suffering, the oppressed, the disadvantaged, the lonely. And there are plenty of people like that who aren’t foreign refugees but have been living here all along. Can we hear Jesus’ words to his disciples: “The poor you have always with you, and you can *do good to them whenever you will*” (Mark 14:7)? Can we hear him saying, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40 KJV)? Helping the less privileged, confronting injustice, encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation, bringing truth and light into dark situations — all these are ways in which you and I can manifest the coming of the Lord, and take part in his Advent.

Another way Jesus comes to us is the declaration of his Word. In many churches, that’s really the only way in which people meet Jesus — which is sad, because there are so many more ways! But *the Word of the gospel is vital* to experiencing the Advent of the Lord. As the apostle Paul says (quoting the Book of

Deuteronomy), "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:8-9). In the New Testament, Jesus himself is the Word; John says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." That's the heart of the Christmas message. The Letter to the Hebrews begins, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."

So Jesus becomes real to a person when the teaching of the Word of God helps them see the connection between the life of Jesus and their life. The Advent of the Lord takes place when the Scriptures penetrate their hearts, and they come to understand where they fit in the Creator's plan for this world he made. I trust this Advent has occurred for you and for me, but if it hasn't *we need to talk!* During our worship gathering there's always a time when you can come to the pastor, or one of the Elders or another leader, and say, "Tell me more about this, because the Word of Jesus has finally gotten to me and I need to make a decision today about how I can really connect with God."



So we've mentioned the coming Advent, the Advent of Jesus as we continue his mission, and the Advent of the Lord through the teaching of his Word. But here's another scenario in which we witness the coming of the Lord: through our experience of *truth and reality*. In Colossians 1 Paul writes these words: "He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:15-17). This may sound strange, both to believers and unbelievers — but just look around you at this earth and this vast universe; and if we believe what Paul is saying, what we behold is the Advent of the Lord Jesus because this is all *his work*. Sometimes we sing, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." Sorry, I think that song has it wrong! In the light of Jesus, the "things of earth" become *more vivid and full of possibility* — because he's behind them all.



In today's scientific culture we're inclined to separate material things from spiritual things as though they exist in separate realms. The Bible doesn't see reality that way; there's no difference between the so-called "natural" and "supernatural," because God, through his Son, is the author of *all things*. He is the maker of all things through his Word — which, as we know is what the New Testament calls Jesus. For example, in Revelation 19:13 we read: "The name by which he is called is The Word of God."

Let me quickly refer to a discussion going on in the community of those who study the origin and nature of the universe — people called cosmologists or physicists. We all know about molecules and atoms, the tiny particles that make up the elements of our physical world. But what are those particles made of? Even smaller particles called protons, neutrons, electrons. But what are they made of? Bits of energy with fancy names like quarks, gluons, mesons. And what are these made of? In trying to answer this question, some physicists have come up with "string theory," the idea that underlying all matter and energy are just vibrations, strings of "sound," if you will, that vibrate in multiple dimensions at every point in the universe. Vibrating strings of

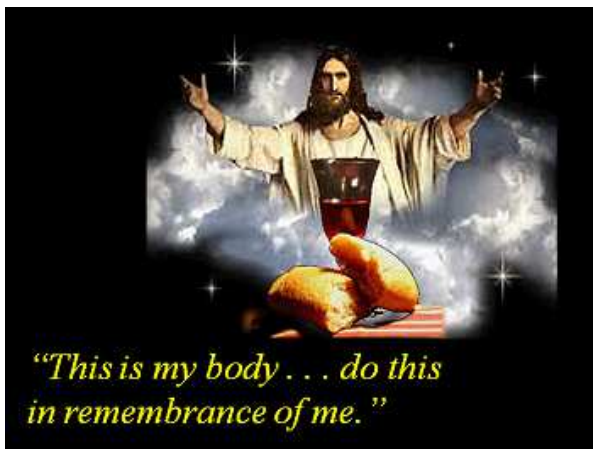
sound? To me that seems like *words!* And the Bible says that through his Word, God has created all things, and sustains them through his Son, the Word of God.

Look for the Advent of the Son of God, then, as revealed in everything that exists, whether material things that make up the universe we live in, or immaterial things like information or words or thought. The Scriptures all move toward the vision the Apostle Paul articulates in Ephesians 1:10, that the Creator's purpose is "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head" — that is, Jesus the Messiah.

Finally, look for the coming of Jesus *in our worship* together. Jesus told his disciples, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). If Jesus, by his Holy Spirit, is present with each believer, how much more is he present *when believers gather* as we do here each week. In what we do as worshipers, the Advent of the Lord comes to special focus. Psalm 22:3 proclaims, "Yet thou art holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel." The praise of the Lord, lifted in worship and song by those who love him, brings his presence into our midst in a powerful way. That's why music and song are so important in Christian worship; Christians are almost the only people who gather as a group to *sing* to the object of their worship. People of non-biblical religions may gather for prayer — or what they call prayer, for their supposed god is a false god — but typically they don't sing. (In some cases, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, they have banned *all* music.) Sometimes we sing a hymn that includes this stanza:

*Let those refuse to sing
Who never knew our God,
But children of the heavenly King
May speak their joys abroad.*

That's why it's important that we sing — or at least try to sing — because that's how we give evidence that we know the Lord is here, *the Lord has come* — and is enthroned on the praise of his people.



recalling something — bringing something from the past into our present experience. Holy Communion isn't just a kind of visual aid to help us remember that Jesus died on the cross once upon a time. It's a way of knowing that *the living Jesus is present* with us now. It's an Advent of the Lord.

So *Jesus is coming!* Let me summarize the ways his Advent takes place.

- He comes to renew God's creation, and transform us into the bodies that belong to that new creation. That's what the Bible calls the "blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13 KJV).

- He comes when we do the work he called us to do, to make God's love real to others.
- He comes in the declaration of the Word of God, which awakens faith in us.
- He comes as we learn to see through all things in our world to the reality behind them, the creative Word of God.
- He comes as we enthrone him in our praise and song.
- He comes as we partake together of the bread and the cup, the representation of his life in our midst.

For New Testament believers, the promise of the coming of the Lord Jesus is always the encouragement to live in a way that reflects his presence with us now. "The hour has come," Paul tells the Romans, "the day is almost here." Therefore "put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. . . . Cloth yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ." The prophet Malachi declared, "The Lord you are seeking will come to his temple." But, as Paul wrote, "Don't you know that *you yourselves are God's temple* and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). We are the temple, and the Lord Jesus *has come to us*. Jesus is coming — *and he is here!*

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