

Advent 01 C 2021
November 28, 2021 :: Luke 21:25-36
Fr. Jim Cook

“Don’t Sweat the Day of Judgment.”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Now, the Season of Advent has mainly been about three things. First, it’s about getting ourselves ready — in heart, mind, and spirit — to celebrate the anniversary of Jesus’ birth. The second thing — and this maybe more important than the first — is that Advent is a time when we remember that we are still waiting for Jesus to come again. And this “coming again,” this returning, is what we refer to as the Second Coming. And the third thing is something I’ll get to in a couple of minutes.

Now, even though we have Christmas pretty much figured out, a lot of people are still fairly unclear about this whole Second Coming thing. So, that’s most of what I want to do this morning: Unpack some aspects of the Second Coming of Jesus.

Every Sunday, when we recite the Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief that Jesus will come again (and I quote) “to judge the living and the dead.” When we say those words, we’re talking about the Second Coming, a day also referred to as the Last

Judgment, as the Final Judgment, or, and perhaps most commonly, as the Day of Judgment.

Now, it's my suspicion that your average Christian has a fairly negative view of that whole Day of Judgment thing. And who can blame us, given everything that we've been told, over the years, to expect of the Day of Judgment?

For example, in his famous sermon entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Jonathan Edwards — who was a 16th century revivalist preacher and theologian — paints a verbal portrait of God who is all too eager to send us to Hell for our sins. And Edwards further describes how we move through life as though walking along a slippery slope, never quite sure when our feet will lose their purchase, plunging us into a fiery abyss. It's not a good picture, and that's just my first example.

Another example is Michelangelo's painting of the Day of Judgment on the wall of the Sistine Chapel. It's a very graphic depiction of Jesus sending people into eternal torment with an almost cavalier gesture of his hand.

Also, I can remember driving on Interstate 35 near Emporia, Kansas, where there was (and likely still is) a billboard which read something like this: “Accept Jesus Christ now, or regret it forever.”

And then, I remember a college classmate who liked to wear a particular tee-shirt to our philosophy of religion class, which bore the face of an angry Jesus, over the words “Jesus is coming, and he is pissed!”

And, finally, I remember once seeing this bumper sticker, which declared: “Jesus your Judge, or Jesus your Lawyer. It’s your choice.”

Now if you put all of this together — along with any other examples *you* can think of — what we’re left with is a pretty negative view of divine judgment in general, and of the Day of Judgment in particular.

However, I think people need to be reminded that the depiction of Jesus as an angry judge — of Jesus as a condemning judge — has *extremely* shallow roots, if *any* roots at all, in the

New Testament. In fact, it's an image of Jesus that is *inconsistent* with how he's portrayed in the gospels.

Karl Barth, who was an extremely important 20th century theologian and biblical scholar, once wrote:

“In the Biblical world of thought, the judge is not primarily the one who rewards some and punishes others; [rather,] he is the man who creates order and restores what has been destroyed.”

In other words — and according to the *Bible* — when Jesus comes “to judge the living and the dead,” he will *not* be coming to hand out rewards and punishments, but rather to restore all that we've ruined, and then to usher in a new heaven and a new earth.

Now, right off the top of my head, I can think of two examples from the Gospels that make this point fairly clearly.

In one, Jesus enters a town and encounters a tax collector named Zacchaeus. In those days tax collectors worked for the

oppressive Roman Empire, and frequently cheated people out of more taxes than they owed. And so, they were generally seen as collaborators and sinners. But, what does Jesus do when he meets Zacchaeus? Does he condemn him? No. Does he punish him? No! In fact, he invites himself to dinner at the home of Zacchaeus, where Zacchaeus is given the opportunity to turn his life around and undo all the bad he's done.

Think also about the story of the woman caught committing adultery, and who is brought before Jesus. Now the laws concerning her behavior are clear: she should be put to death. But what does Jesus do? Does he condemn her? No. Does he punish her? No! He forgives her, and then tells her to change her behavior.

And so, what I take from these two accounts is exactly the point that the theologian Karl Barth is trying to make. That is, that the role of Jesus as our Judge is *not* that of someone who metes out rewards and punishments — but *especially* punishments. Rather, the role of Jesus as our Judge is to be someone who creates order, and who restores what has been marred or broken by human hands.

And so this, therefore, is one of the messages of the Season of Advent: That we do *not* have to face the Day of Judgment with doubt, anxiety or fear. Rather, we can face it with anticipation and joy, because it will be the second and final coming of the One who restores the world. Therefore, the promise of the Second Coming of Jesus, and the promise of the Day of Judgment, *is a message of hope*. Someone else, and I can't remember who, described it in this way:

“The second coming is that final moment when the whole world, and history as we know it, will openly and totally belong to God.

It is at that moment when the mission of the Church will be complete.

The hunger and thirst for truth will be over.

The Light of truth will overcome the darkness of ignorance and fear.

Suffering and sadness, death and disease will be no more.

The struggle for justice in love, and for public obedience to God, will no longer be an issue.

Peace, grounded in faith, will reign.

The transfiguration of the world by Christ will unfold.

[And] at long last, every knee will bend and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father. And, life itself will consist of praise.”

With this wonderful image, with this hope-filled description of the last days — of the day when Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead — it’s no wonder, then, that the New Testament closes with this prayer: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 21:20b)

Now, as I mentioned at the beginning, the season of Advent is all about three things, and I've already talked about the first two. And so, the third message or theme of the season of Advent is this:

Advent invites us to imagine what it might look like to live our lives *without* the fear of an angry God. And instead to live with the assurance that God's love for us knows no bounds. In other words, it's an invitation to live a new life.

There was this time, about twenty-some years ago, when my whole family had been down with the flu. Everyone had been housebound with sniffles and sneezes, coughs and fevers. But it was a nice day when we all began to feel better, so I went off to work, and Peggy took the girls out into our backyard to play. In one corner of our backyard there was a swing set, and Laura made a dash for that. And in the other corner there was a dog run, with a six-foot chain-link fence around it, and a dog house in it, and Emily headed for that. And once inside, Emily climbed to the very top of the doghouse, grasped the top of the fence, and began to

look around. “Emily, what are you doing?” Peggy asked. And Emily, who would have been around four years old then, answered, “I’m looking at the world.” And it was like she was seeing it again for the first time.

You see, the Season of Advent doesn’t need to be a time when we look to the future in doubt or fear. In fact, it should be a wonderful, awe-filled season when we take the time to look around — to look beyond so much of the brokenness that is around us — and see the marvelous and extraordinary things that God is doing in the world.

The season of Advent reminds us, in other words, that we need to practice looking at the world through the eyes of a child; and see how the wonderful mysteries of God are constantly being unveiled.

However, there is still a big difference between the world of here and now, and the world to which Advent points us. I mean, Christ has come, and we’re celebrating his birthday in a few weeks. But the Kingdom of Christ has not come, at least not completely,

and its effects haven't been fully realized. But this is our Advent challenge:

To do whatever we can to bring this new vision to the people around us; to help them realize that what lies ahead is infinitely better, and more glorious, than what is behind us.

And so, this, then is our Advent goal: To help a broken and fallen world learn to pray with us and say, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

Amen.