

1 Samuel 2:1-10  
Hebrews 10:11-25

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time  
November 15, 2009

## SECOND COMING? DON'T MISS THE *FIRST!*

People tired of living in a culture with diminished support of religion. The discouraging presence of deeply pervasive evil, passing for religion. People questioning more and more the value of religion. Worship attendance beginning to fail. Zeal for mission faltering. And it's increasingly hard to find vibrant congregational fellowship of people regularly meeting together.

We aren't talking about the church in America in the twenty-first century (though we could be). This is the setting of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews from which we just read. To many living under the boot of imperial Rome the world was tragically broken. Many Christians felt it was so broken that they expected the cosmos to roll up like a scroll as God intervened with the day of judgment which, for the faithful, would also be the day of their redemption, ushering in the dramatic return of Christ in the Second Coming.

This, however, is not the author of Hebrews' interest. The letter is much more concerned with the here and now. The writer wants to show how a deeply caring God addresses the world's brokenness. As Tom Long puts it, God does not look at the world's distress from a distant place, mouthing "There, there, it will all work out," platitudes. This is a God in Jesus Christ who enters the full range of human life with its tragedy and suffering.

There are few, if any, here who are not struggling to find a basis for a more compelling hope. Our world also seems turned upside down. Sometimes we find ourselves just hoping to get through the next week unscathed. Or getting through the next corporate downsizing that sweeps through the ranks like a tsunami. Or wondering if we will ever see our parents well again, or just stable. Or getting the children through high school unscathed. Or dreaming of the prospect of relaxing a little when the college years are paid off. Or wondering if retirement will ever be an option.

As a pastor, I'm deeply conscious of these struggles. Then I came across a line written by C.S. Lewis during World War 2. The war was not over, and the allies felt compelled to take desperate measures to break the will of the German people. But the outcome could not be predicted. So Lewis wrote, "Never in peace or war commit your happiness to the future." For obvious reasons we have no claim on future happiness. Life can be snuffed out in a heartbeat while crossing the road and waving goodbye to a friend. . . ! But we always have some claim on the eternal present.

In Jesus' day spiritual security was linked to making offerings to God through the temple priests, only in Jerusalem. Even if one lived only a day's journey away, perhaps twenty miles, and were lucky enough to make the journey three times a year to atone for one's own and one's household's sins, the interim might be excruciation. As Tom Long has remarked, "The purpose of sacrificial offerings is not to meet God's needs [as though God needed to be satisfied], but to meet the human need to have a clean conscience."

Temple priests (there was only ever one temple) never stopped twenty-four/seven, twelve months a year, offering sacrifices. Yet all the while the present moment gave access to God, but the culture, the politics of tradition, promoted no substitute. The Letter to the Hebrews, however, reminds us that our hope is no longer in the blood of lambs and goats spilled at the alter of "sacrifices that can never take away sins" (11), but in Jesus' self-sacrifice, *once for all*. We have in him the final High Priest who is able to sympathize with us in our weakness. Rather than an endless succession of priests who are as bruised and broken, and as self-concerned and fallible as we are. What the priest offered could only be given if you

turned up. What Jesus offers *always, now*, happens wherever you are—in the eternal present. Again, “Never in peace or war commit your happiness to the future.”

Oddly, in spite of Jesus’ offer of unshakeable companionship, much of Christian history has turned to a future hope despite the present reality—the hope of a future heaven, and hope in a Second Coming. Yet Jesus never made this notion a part of his public message or preaching, and according to the gospels gave it only to four select disciples just before his crucifixion. Still, Christians over the centuries, and especially in hard times, have trumpeted the arrival of the Second Coming thousands of times. I did a master’s thesis on the influence of second coming theology on American history and culture, and the most compelling realization was that in 2000 years of predicting it, every single instance has been wrong! Even the Apostle Paul in his earliest writings 1 and 2 Thessalonians (the earliest New Testament writings) felt the imminence of Christ’s return. Yet the later one moves through his letters, the less he mentions it, as if struggling toward a revised perception of Christ among us. The phrase “second coming” is not even found anywhere in the Bible, although other terms such as *parousia* and “return of Christ” are found.

So what does “second coming” mean. Commonly it is interpreted to mean the supernatural intervention of God through a spectacular return of Christ at the end of time, the end of the age. Yet Jesus often spoke of that heavenly kingdom, “the kingdom of God” as being here and now. “Do you not realize,” he chided a Pharisee, “that the kingdom of God is among [or within] you?” (Luke 17:21)—*here and now*. Some see it as a personal meeting with Christ at the end of life. Others read the Book of Revelation relating to the Second Coming as part of a great cosmic conflagration between the powers of good and evil, a battle which Revelation makes clear God will ultimately win, and in this sense some see the book as a parable of good and evil. Still others believe that Christ’s return relates to those martyred in fidelity to our faith, especially early Christians when broadly persecuted by Rome at the end of the first-century. I prefer to see the Second Coming as Jesus’ resurrection appearances, and especially at the unleashing of the universal Spirit at Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus ascension.

All speculations aside, I am here to tell you that our perfectly loving and faultlessly accepting God is here among us *right now!* Now, I know that can be a hard thing to get one’s head around, because most of us carry a lot of baggage. But God does love you, and wants the absolute best for you, a loving communion that is so real as to be palpable. Let me offer an analogy. Yesterday Carol Netter sent me a “You Tube” piece that she found very compelling, and wanted me to take a look at it. And I had a jam packed day with the sermon to finish and a wedding and reception, and I really didn’t want to get into it right then. But I did. It told of a brilliant pianist and trumpeter named Patrick Henry Hughes who plays and marches with the University of Louisville marching band. But there’s a catch. Patrick was born with no eyes, and limbs afflicted with an inability to grow properly, so he’s confined to a wheelchair for life.

When Patrick was born his parents were devastated. They’d had such hopes for their son who was now so physically incomplete. Yet when he was just a very few months old, they would hold him on the piano bench and pick out a key, and sightless as he is, Patrick would find it a couple of tries. By two he was playing requests. Now, every day Patrick’s father sits with him through every college class. He works each night for UPS on the graveyard shift, comes home at 6 a.m., sleeps till eleven, than gets up and takes Patrick to college. Then to practice with a national class marching band, Dad wheels the chair through the complex route with the university marching band.

Here is a father’s love that simply will not let his son go, because he sees not a child broken, but a child with extraordinary possibilities. And so he has devoted himself to his son determined to make good things happen, because he loves him so much.

This is the God that the writer of Hebrews has come to know, and now delivers to this floundering people. So he writes with five challenges; five things that they (WE) need to do—five marks of the people of God, the church.

The first is to live *confidently*. By his death in our place Jesus has already cleansed us “and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by other means” (Acts 13:39). Moment by ever present moment we can ask simply to be released of all the guilt and fear that cripples us, and so live before God freed from an evil conscience, (.22) ours for the asking, because we are a baptized and forgiven people.

Second, the Christian life lives in a *present hope*. Of what use can a future hope be if it is always beyond? Christian hope is not rooted in human effort or ‘cockeyed optimism’ but by living in the promise in these “between-times” deeply companioned by God . So, “hold fast, for he who has promised is faithful” (.23).

The Christian life is lived *in community*. You are not alone, not even in your private moments with God, for the prayers, memories, affections, worship partnering, and friendship of the hidden host is always with you. Therefore, my friends (*adelphoi*, isn’t that a lovely word, v. 19), our purpose, he writes, is to “provoke one another to love and good deeds,” for we are not here for ourselves alone, but to deliver God in however small packages to those about us. And here I confess some frustration when I hear people say that they can be Christian apart from the fellowship of others in God. Does anyone know the significance of November 5<sup>th</sup>? That’s right, Guy Fawkes night when, in celebration of the good Catholic who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament 200 years ago (God bless him!) the Brits build huge bonfires in every neighborhood across the nation. Most of it gets consumed in 20 minutes, but then the big stuff settles and burns for hours. As a child I recall with fascination watching the fire burn, and how when a burning log rolled away from the main fire it would burn well for a minute then quickly turn to smoldering and go dark. Separated from the main fire it had no real life. It lost its vitality. It’s the same with us when we get separated from the vitality of our church family. Christians are made for each other and among each other.

The fourth grows out of community, *living in solidarity* together. Holy lives, Christian lives mature in loving service to Christ and others together. A sanctuary is never a place of total retreat but always a place of preparation. We enter to worship and leave to serve—together. We are all “infants in faith,” says the writer, and need the solid food of learning, prayer and fellowship that enlarges our wellbeing. This is why SUPPER AT ST. JOHN’S has resonated so well with so many. It feeds us as a body, the body of Christ, the Church.

Fifth, and finally, Hebrews urges us to live with a *sense of urgency*. Each day is a gift—how often do we hear that from those whose lives are threatened with foreshortening. A few years ago, hurrying to church on Sunday morning with Katherine in the passenger seat, I ran clear through the red light at Conestoga and Devon State, hitting the brakes in shock and disbelief only afterward. If someone had been coming through on green Katherine could have been critically injured. Now, I can hardly pass through that intersection without thinking of it. Life is a present gift. The future never arrives. If we could know it, we might not be able to bear it.

There is much to do in such a world as this. And the world will not be changed by weak resignation or being a mere spectator. Few people better characterize living with a sense of urgency that Mother Theresa in this story by Robert Macauley, the founder of AmeriCares. He and Mother Theresa were on an airplane to Mexico. As box dinners were being passed out, Mother Theresa asked how much the airline would donate to her charity if she returned her dinner. When she found out, she soon had everyone, including the crew, returning their dinners.

But it didn’t stop there. When the plane arrived at its destination, Mother Theresa asked the crew if she could have the dinners (the ones she’d already been promised payment for!) donated to the poor. And when the airline provided the dinners, she asked to borrow one of their maintenance trucks to deliver them.

Our present, in which Jesus constantly lives with us, is eternally available. The future is meaningless. Imagining it only robs the present of its vitality. “We live in obedience to the gospel as present tense,” writes Earl Palmer. To live in the present, with and for the one who came and remains, is the only way to live, rather than waiting for one still to come.

Amen.