Return of the King
Matthew 25:31–46; 2 Peter 3:8–15a
Sunday, November 22, 2026 (Christ the King)

Let us pray: Show us what it means, Lord, for us to live in your kingdom, and for you to reign on earth as you do in heaven, in Jesus' name. Amen.

About a month ago, I finally went to go see the movie *The Odyssey*. I had been wanting to see it for a while, but hadn't had a chance. So I went onto the movie theater app to buy ticket, and as I was scrolling down to find the show times, I saw another movie that I hadn't heard of, but it caught my interest, so I went to go see it the next day. It was called *The Jesus Tapes*. (Anyone heard of it or seen it? I didn't think so…I was the only person in the theater. So it won't offend you when I say that) It was one of the absolute worst movies I have ever seen in my life. And I have seen *a lot* of bad movies. It was so poorly written. The dialogue was not at all realistic or believable. The acting was horrendous (to the point that I wondered if these were actually professional actors or just people who decided to make a movie for the fun of it…I was actually Googling in the theater to see if this was real.). The story was disjointed and didn't always make sense. It had kind of a documentary style, but not really, and then there were times when it felt like a satire. *The Odyssey* was over three hours long. This movie was just under an hour and a half, *and it felt longer than The Odyssey*. There would be times when the screen would fade to black, like the movie was over, and I would think, "That's an odd place to end the movie, but thank goodness it's over," when all of a sudden it would come back and start another scene!

But the reason that I went to see it and didn't walk out is because it had an interesting premise. The basic idea is that there is this man who hosts one of those actor's studio type shows where they interview actors and directors and writers. He is filming his weekly show and finishes one segment, and is ready for his next guest, when his producer comes in and tells him that the next guest had to cancel. The guy says, "What should we do, just call it a day?" And the producer says, "Well, there's this guy in the lobby who

says that he is Jesus Christ." And the guy says, "Bring him in. I'll interview him." So he does a series of three interviews with this man who says that he is Jesus and has come back to earth. At first the guy is kind of making fun of it, thinking that this guy who says he is Jesus is crazy. But the more they talk, he becomes skeptical. Then he becomes curious. Then he actually starts thinking, "What if this guy really *is* Jesus?"

The first interview airs on tv, and public reaction is split. Some people think he's a fraud, and they get really angry and organize protests and want to cancel the show because they say it's blasphemy. Other people say, "When I listen to the things he is saying, I don't know, maybe he *is* Jesus." Eventually, the guy who says he is Jesus is found murdered in an alley, but then – plot twist – *his body disappears from the county morgue!* But the movie poses the question to us, "If Christ came back today, *how would we react*?" And that's a really interesting question.

We don't talk much about the Second Coming of Christ. But there are references to it all throughout the Christian faith. When we say The Apostles' Creed, one of the earliest confessions of our faith, we say of Jesus, "On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, *from thence he shall come* to judge the quick and the dead." Another translation of the Apostles' Creed says, "*He will come again* to judge the living and the dead." So we confess almost every week that Christ will come again. The Nicene Creed written in the year 325 says, "He will come again in his glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." If you grew up in a high liturgical tradition, you know that "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will *come again*." In the 27 books of the New Testament there are well over *60 references* to the Second Coming of Christ, many of them coming from Jesus himself. But still, we don't *talk* about it much, and many of us do not *think* about it on a regular basis.

When we *do* think about it, for many people it evokes feelings of fear, images of destruction and judgment. Like we just heard Peter say, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire." And like Jesus says at the beginning of our reading from Matthew, "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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left." He will *judge* between people and separate the good from the bad, *and we hope we're on the right side.* This idea has been used in some manipulative ways by churches over the years, to instill fear and guilt in people to get them to come to faith in Jesus. And for some people, we don't want to think about Christ coming again because we enjoy life here on earth, and we love the people we share it with, and we don't want it to *end*.

But doesn't Jesus say that he is with us always, so does he *need* to come again if he hasn't actually *left us*? Is it an actual, physical return to earth, or more of a spiritual thing?

What *do* Christians believe about the Second Coming of Christ, and is it an *essential* part of our faith? Do we *have* to believe that Christ will come again? That's what I want us to think about today.

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Let's start by looking at what some of the most well-known theologians throughout history have said about this. Martin Luther said, "it will be a bodily coming, a bodily seeing in bodily form." John Calvin said of Christ's Second Coming, "He will descend from heaven in visible form, in like manner as he was seen to ascend." John Wesley said, "The Lord himself shall come with clouds, in his own glory, and the glory of his Father." Karl Barth said that "his coming in its final form will be his coming as this one," meaning that the Jesus who comes again will be the same Jesus as the one who came 2,000 years ago. The Presbyterian Church's *Brief Statement of Faith*, which we use for an Affirmation of Faith sometimes,

says, “We watch for God’s new heaven and new earth, praying, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’” C.S. Lewis says of the Second Coming, “If this is not an integral part of the faith once given to the saints, I do not know what is.” N.T. Wright calls it one of the most “vital Christian doctrines.”

And the *reason* for that is because even though Christ came once to conquer sin and death, *there is still sin, and there is still death*. So they say that Christ will come again to redeem this broken world and make it whole again. It will be the final victory over sin and evil and death. And for many Christians over the centuries, it has not been a source of fear but of *great hope*. There is suffering and injustice now, but Christ will come again to right all that is wrong, to fix this broken world, and to make things whole again.

So historically, Christians *have believed* that Jesus Christ will come again in physical, bodily form at the end of the age, to bring God’s kingdom to earth; that Christ will come again to rule and reign on earth as he does in heaven. There have been disagreement about that throughout the centuries, but the early Christians believed that it was *imminent*. They thought (and *hoped*) that it was going to happen *any day now*. Obviously, it *didn’t*. It has been 2,000 years. If it was going to happen, *wouldn’t it have surely happened by now?*

That is the criticism that the first Christians heard regularly. Peter talks about it just before the part that I read earlier. He says to these early Christians, “In the last days, scoffers will come…saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” People were *mocking* the early Christians, saying, “You keep saying that Jesus is going to come back. Where is he? It’s been 10, 20, 30 years. Did he get delayed? Sidetracked? Is he just slow? Maybe he’s not coming back at all!”

Let's go back to *The Odyssey*. How many of you saw the movie *The Odyssey* or have read it or are at least familiar with the story? Odysseus, the king of Ithaca in Greece, goes off to fight a war. He is away from home fighting for ten years. When he finally wins the war, he and his men set off to go back home, but various things happen, and he gets delayed. For ten more years. So twenty years he is gone. Meanwhile, his wife and son are waiting for him back home. They are *positive* that he is still alive, and that he is going to return. But there are all these other people who say, "No, he's dead. No one has seen him or heard from him in years. He's not coming back. You should just move on." But his wife and son remain faithful. He *promised* them that he would return, and so they keep holding out hope until, finally, he does.

Peter is writing, in part, to reassure these early Christians; to help them hold on to their hope that Christ will return. He says that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. So for us it's been 2,000 years, but maybe for God it's only been two days. He says that Jesus is not *slow* about his promise, as some think of slowness, but rather Jesus is *patient*, giving everyone time to repent and turn things around and get ready. He says that Christ will come like a thief – suddenly, without warning or notice. And until he does, Peter says, *what sort of persons ought we to be?* How should we live? What should we *do*? He tells them that they should lead lives of holiness and godliness, so that when Christ *does* return, he will find them *at peace*, without spot or blemish. They have nothing to be afraid of.

We have been promised by Jesus that he will come again to fix this broken world and make all things new. It is easy for us to question that promise or doubt it. It is much *harder* to *believe* it. And I'll be really honest with you, there are some days where I think, "Yes, Christ will come again," and there are other days when I say, "Man, I just don't know." But what we are called to do, like Odysseus' family, is

to *hold on to hope*. We are called to *trust God* and live in the way that Jesus told us is good and right. That's all we *can* do.

A few years ago, I was at my doctor's office. My doctor wasn't available, so I had to see someone else that I had never met before. We were talking, and he asked me, "What do you do for a living?" I said that I'm a pastor, to which he says, "Oh! Let me ask you something. In Ezekiel 38, it talks about a confederacy of nations that will come together against Israel in the final battle that will lead to Christ's return." (That is *not* what it talks about, but whatever.) He says, "When we look at the Middle East right now, with Iran and all these other nations lining up against Israel, do you think we're in the end times?" This is my *doctor*, mind you. I said to him what I always tell people when this comes up. Jesus tells us that we are not supposed to know when he will come again. All that we are supposed to do is live the way that he taught us to live – love God and love our neighbor – go about the work that he has called us to do, and *trust* that no matter what happens, God will take care of us. To which my doctor said, "Yeah, that's not what I asked you." But that's the answer Jesus gave, so it's good enough for me.

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So many people look for signs and try to interpret world events to know when Christ is going to return. A few weeks ago, I saw someone post on social media, "Final warning. Jesus is coming back. 100%." It felt like a threat, like, "You better be ready!" A pastor I know said in response, "He's already here. He's the refugee detained for simply seeking asylum from political violence. He's the hungry child no longer getting SNAP benefits. He's the sick grandmother no longer getting healthcare. He's the homeless man arrested for sleeping outside. We will be judged by how we treat them," as Jesus says in Matthew 25, "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, 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. For just as you do to one of the least of these who are members of my family,

you do to me." And then this pastor wrote, "It is a broken Christianity that threatens people with Jesus' return while refusing to recognize him in the faces of those who are suffering."

Will Christ come again? I really don't know. I *want* to believe that he will, and I do my best to trust in his promise. But I don't know with absolute certainty that he will. That's not what *faith* is. Faith is not about *certainty*. It is about trusting where we cannot see and have no proof that God is with us and loves us and will take care of us.

What I *do* know is that he has called us to see him *now* in the faces of our neighbors. If we welcome *them*, we welcome *him*. If we care for *them*, we care for *him*. If we love *them*, we love *him*. That is the *only thing* that we have control over – how we will treat one another. The rest is in God's hands. All we can do is follow Jesus and trust God, whatever may come. If we do *that*, then when Christ comes again, we will be found by him to be ready, and if he *doesn't* come in our lifetime, we will still have been faithful. Either way, his will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.