

## “Don’t Sweat the Day of Judgment.”

Today is the first Sunday in the Season of Advent. It’s a season that consists of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. And it’s a season that has two main purposes.

The first purpose is to help us prepare for our celebration of Christ’s birth, and the bible readings we hear help us remember why that’s an important event. But I think y’all are up to speed on that, so I won’t bother going into it.

The second purpose of Advent is to remind us that we are *still* waiting for Jesus to come to Earth again. This is what we refer to as the Second Coming.

Now, even though we’ve got Christmas pretty much figured out, many of us are still a bit fuzzy about what it means that we are looking ahead to the Second Coming of Jesus. And so, that’s what I want to do this morning: unpack some aspects of the Second Coming of Jesus.

Every Sunday we make a brief reference to the Second Coming of Jesus in the Nicene Creed, when we affirm that Jesus will come again “to judge the living and the dead.” In other words, the Second Coming is something that we also refer to as Last Judgment, as the Final Judgment, or as the Day of Judgment.

Now, I suspect that the average Christian has a fairly negative view of Jesus coming to be our judge, and those negative thoughts are funded by what we’ve been exposed to in the world around us. And one of the things we’ve been exposed to is a sense that God gets really, really angry when we mess up.

Let me give you some examples.

First, in his classic 18th-century sermon, entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) paints a verbal portrait of God as simply aching to send us to Hell for our transgressions. As Edwards describes it, we move through life as though walking along a slippery slope, not knowing when our feet will lose their purchase, plunging us into the depths of hell. It’s not a good thought.

A second example is the masterpiece of fresco painting by Michelangelo on a wall of the Sistine Chapel. In one scene he depicts the Day of Judgment in very graphic detail, with Jesus sending sinners into eternal torment with an almost cavalier gesture of his hand. It's an image designed to evoke horror and fear.

A third example was something I used to see while living in Kansas. Along the interstate between Kansas City and Emporia, there was a billboard which displayed nothing but these words: "Accept Jesus Christ now, or regret it forever."

And then, I had a college classmate who frequently wore a t-shirt that bore the image of an angry Jesus, and emblazoned with the words "Jesus is coming, and he is pissed!"

And finally, there is the bumper sticker I once saw which declared, "Jesus my Judge or Jesus my Lawyer. It's your choice."

Now if you put all of these examples together, what we're left with is a pretty negative view of divine judgment in general, and of the Day of Judgment in particular.

However, the thing is — and this is important — the thing is that *none* of these examples have any significant roots in scripture. In fact, these images of Jesus are inconsistent with what we see in the gospels. Two examples from the Gospel make this point fairly well.

One day Jesus enters a town and encounters a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Now as I've mentioned before, in those days tax collectors were seen as the worst kind of sinner. So, when Jesus encounters Zacchaeus, what does he do? Does he condemn him? No. Instead, Jesus invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' home, and gives Zacchaeus the opportunity to undo the damage he's done to the members of his community, and return any money he has taken illicitly.

Think also about the account of how, one day, a woman, who had been caught in the act of adultery, is brought before Jesus. Now scripture is pretty clear about what should be done with her: she should be executed. But what does Jesus do? Does he condemn her? No. He forgives her, and then tells her to change her behavior.

So, what's going on?

Well, Karl Barth was an extremely important 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and scholar of the New Testament, who 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, when Jesus comes “to judge the living and the dead” (as we say in the Nicene Creed) it *won't* be for the purpose of handing out rewards and punishments. Rather, it will be for the purpose of restoring order to the disorder we've made of this world, and to inaugurate a new era under his rule.

Therefore, this is one of the main messages of the Season of Advent: We do not have to face the end of this world — the Day of Judgment, that is — with doubt, anxiety or fear. Rather, we can face it with joy and anticipation because it will be the second and final coming of God the Creator, of God the Savior, and of God the Restorer of the World, in whose wake the rule of God will prevail once and for all.

The promise of the second coming of Jesus — the promise of the Day of Judgment — therefore is a message of hope. Someone, and I don't know who, described it in these words:

“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. 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 new picture, this hope-filled description of the last days, it's no wonder the New Testament closes with this prayer: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 21:20b)

I said earlier that the season of Advent has two main purposes: that it's about getting ready for Christmas, and it's about remembering that we are waiting for Jesus to return to earth. But now that I think about it, I realize that Advent has a third purpose, and it's this: Advent invites us to think about what it means to live our lives without the fear of an angry God, but rather with the knowledge and assurance that God's love for us knows no bounds. In other words, it's an invitation to live a new life.

The message and promise of Advent is that, when God looks at the messes in our lives — at those places where we've screwed things up, and at those places where others have hurt us — that God wants to work with us, and within us, to heal those wounds and fix those broken places.

In other words, the message of Advent is that *we can be whole again*, in all those places where the world has messed us up, and in all those places where we've messed up those around us — family members, friends, coworkers, and even strangers.

But it won't be an easy or quick process — in fact it may take a lifetime — but it's a process that we can begin today, simply by offering all of our messes, all of our woundedness, all of our pain, and all the pain we've inflicted on others, to God. And having offered it to God, to begin working with God to begin the process of renewing it and restoring it.

How that process will unfold, and how long it will take, and what we'll look like when it's over, is all a mystery. But it's a journey we'll take hand-in-hand with God, and it's a journey we'll take knowing that, in the end, all will be well.

And so the message of Advent is not only that Christ will come one day to restore and renew the all of creation, but also that Christ can come today to begin the process of restoring and renewing our lives. And all we have to do to get that thing started is to pray, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"