

“Don’t Sweat the Day of Judgment.”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and the Season of Advent is mainly been about two things. First, it’s about getting ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But the second thing— and maybe the more important thing— is that Advent is a time to remember that we are still waiting for Jesus to come *again*. And this “coming again” is what we refer to as the Second Coming.

And even though we have Christmas pretty much figured out, a lot of us are still pretty hazy about this whole Second Coming thing. So, that’s what I want to do this morning: unpack some aspects of the Second Coming of Jesus.

Every Sunday, we make reference to the Second Coming in the Nicene Creed, when we affirm that Jesus will come again “to judge the living and the dead.” When we say those words, we’re talking about the Second Coming. But it’s also referred to as the Last Judgment, as the Final Judgment, or (and perhaps most commonly) as the Day of Judgment.

Now, I suspect that the average Christian has a fairly negative view of that whole Day of Judgment thing; and who can blame us, when you think about all that we’ve been exposed to.

For example, in his classic 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 as simply aching 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. Not a good thought. But that’s just one 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 sinners into eternal torment with an almost cavalier gesture of his hand.

And, if you’ve driven on I-35 near Emporia, Kansas, you may have seen a billboard which reads something like this: “Accept Jesus Christ now, or regret it forever.”

And then, I remember a college classmate who liked to wear a t-shirt which bore the image of an angry Jesus, over the words “Jesus is coming, and he is pissed!” Maybe you’ve seen that t-shirt?

My final example is the bumper sticker I once saw which declared, “Jesus your Judge or Jesus your Lawyer. It’s your choice.” Nice.

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 image of Jesus as an angry judge— as a condemning judge— *has extremely shallow roots*, if any at all, in the New Testament. In fact, it’s an image of Jesus that is *inconsistent* with what’s portrayed in the gospels.

Karl Barth, who was an extremely important 20th century theologian, and scholar of the New Testament, 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 this is 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 usher in a new heaven and a new earth.

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. In fact, he invites himself to dinner at the home of Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus is given the opportunity to turn his life around and undo all the bad he has done.

Think also about the account 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. 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 Barth is trying to make. The role of Jesus as 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 ruined 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 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. Therefore, the promise of the Second Coming of Jesus, and the promise of the Day of Judgment, all, 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, 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)

Now, I mentioned, at the beginning of this sermon, that the season of Advent is all about two things: that it's about getting ready for Christmas, and it's about remembering that Jesus is going to return to earth to reestablish his kingdom. But now that I've had time to think about it, I realize that Advent is also about a third thing, 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, to live with the knowledge 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 19 years ago, when my whole family had been down with the flu. Everyone had been housebound with sniffles, sneezes, coughs, fevers, and so forth. And 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 in the other corner there was a dog run, surrounded by a six-foot high fence. Inside the dog run was a doghouse. Well, Laura made a dash for the swings, while Emily headed for the dog run. 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.

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 us— beyond so much of the brokenness that is often of our own doing— to see the marvelous and extraordinary things God is doing in the world. And the season of Advent reminds us that we need to practice looking at the world with 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.