

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**The Reverend David Anderson**

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**COMING ATTRACTIONS**

Isaiah 2:1-5 & Matthew 24:36-44

Human beings are creative creatures. All of us are constantly making plans for the future. Over lunch, a woman asks her friend: *“Have you made plans for your wedding?”* A father phones his son and inquires: *“What are your plans for Christmas?”* Our consumer culture utilizes advertising to get us to make plans for the “Coming Attractions” of holiday sales, new movie releases, and Christmas programs. Advent means “coming.” During the four Sundays of Advent leading up to Christmas, the Church proclaims the “Coming Attractions” of God as regarding humanity’s future.

ISAIAH proclaims God’s vision for humanity’s future in the words, *“In days to come”*. He depicts the Lord’s house erected upon the highest mountain on the earth that attracts people from every nation for one purpose (2:3): *“that the Lord may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”* The Lord as Teacher instructs humanity about righteous living. Isaiah also depicts the Lord as Judge who arbitrates disputes between nations to establish the truth regarding legitimate justice concerns of each nation for one purpose, namely to change hearts that make peace possible (2:4): *“He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”* Isaiah’s vision is carved on the outside wall of the United Nations building. In light of the recent outbreak of military attacks between North Korea and South Korea, and the intractable conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, do we not need a judge to come as an arbiter for peace?

God’s judgment is a major theme of Advent in preparing for the “Coming Attractions” of God in the birth of Jesus. We began worship by singing: *“O come, Desire of nations, bind all people in one heart and mind. Bid envy, strife, and discord cease. Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.”* This is a prayer for God’s judgment to change hearts and minds. Yet judgment is jarring to many who would rather sing a sentimental song like *“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas.”* The purpose of God’s judgment is not to punish humankind. Rather, it is to arbitrate disputes with justice that aims for reconciliation and peace. Isaiah proclaims that this door opens when nations choose to abandon their militaristic responses to disputes and learn how to address mutual concerns of justice that can lead to a lasting peace.

The coming of God to judge the nations forms the backdrop of Jesus’ opening words in Matthew’s lesson when he says (24:36): *“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* The early Church believed that the “Coming Attractions” of God in the birth of Jesus marked the beginning of the end. Following his resurrection and ascension, they expected that Jesus would return as the *“Son of Man”*, mentioned in the Book of Daniel, to judge all nations. In verses 30-31, that precede today’s lesson, we read: *“Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”*

The choir sang, “*See there, the Lord Comes.*” It refers to the “Coming Attractions” of God as the Lord “*comes to bring judgment upon all nations*”. In the Nicene Creed, the Church affirms: “*He (Jesus Christ) will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead....*” Underlying Jesus’ teaching is a question raised by the first Christians, and perhaps us too, about Jesus’ delayed return: Do we have an urgent hope for God’s future reign of peace?

The vision of the “*Son of Man*” who comes to gather the elect is depicted by two men working in the field and two women grinding meal when one man and one woman are taken away. They represent all who keep faith in Christ, not by what they profess with their lips, but by the way they live. Matthew encourages the Church to remain faithful to Christ, in turbulent times, by pursuing righteousness and justice as the way to peace in the coming kingdom of God.

However, since we do not know when Christ will return to establish God’s reign of righteousness, justice, and peace, the danger is that we may become distracted by the pleasures of life like the people in Noah’s day. They were busy eating, drinking, and entering into marriages when unexpectedly the people were struck by a disastrous flood. It is similar for the people in our day who were taken by surprise by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and also by the global economic tsunami that swept over people’s lives in September 2008. In the face of unexpected disasters, recovering what we have lost can result in us becoming indifferent to the biblical “Coming Attractions” of God’s vision for humanity’s future.

What does the future hold for humanity? Expect the same is the conventional wisdom. At Christmas, it can be the “sentimentality” of the season that can distract us from the good news of Jesus’ birth. On the contrary, Jesus taught to expect the unexpected. Jesus said to his disciples (24:44): “*Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*” This is God whose coming in Christ contradicts conventional wisdom. However, faith in God’s future for humanity can waver with complacency in thinking peace to be an impossible dream.

How would we react if peace unexpectedly broke out between Israel and the Palestinians, between North Korea and South Korea, or reconciliation across religions or among members of our families? Would we be skeptical or thank God for the unexpected reality of peace? If the purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world, as Zechariah proclaimed (Luke 1:79), was “*to guide our feet into the way of peace,*” then how tragic it is for people whose joy at Christmas is only the merriment of holiday gift-giving, eating and drinking. Advent preparation is like Jesus’ illustration of a homeowner who never knows when a thief might break into his house.

Let us be alert to prevent the cultural Christmas thief from breaking into our homes and stealing the treasure of our faith wrapped up in the birth of Jesus the Christ. Let us prepare for the “Coming Attractions” of God at Christmas. Let us expect the unexpected from God to guide our feet into the way of righteousness and justice as we anticipate the coming of God’s kingdom of peace to be born in the hearts and minds of all people and nations. ALLELUIA! AMEN.