## Isaiah 2:1-5

2The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. 4He 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. 5O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

## Matthew 24:36-44

36“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

**Preparing for Christ**

I watched one of my favorite Christmas shows over the Thanksgiving holiday: *A Charlie Brown Christmas.* Do you remember that one? Remember the opening song? The first words we hear are “Christmas time is here, Happiness and cheer, Fun for all that children call their favorite time of the year.” It is a cheery time of year – you hear it in the songs and see it on most people’s faces. And yet today’s Gospel reading sure throws a cold blanket on that cheeriness, doesn’t it? There’s talk of floods, of thieves in the night, of people being “taken” and “left behind.” There’s stark warning about “being alert” for an unpredictable time when the “Son of Man” comes. Do these words and images give you much Christmas cheer? Do they make you feel happy? I think for most of us they evoke anxiety and fear. Is that what the church wants us to feel as we faithfully follow our lectionary? Why start this Advent season, which coincides so perfectly with the Christmas shopping season, with fearful images and warnings of scary surprises?

The answer: so we can be prepared, not for Christmas but for Christ. Which are you preparing for? There is a difference. As busy as this season is, it’s much easier for us to prepare for Christmas than it is to prepare for Christ, isn’t it? Sure, there’s a lot to do; we have to bring the Christmas tree out of the basement, set up the decorations and ornaments, write the Christmas cards, wrap the presents, and get everything in the mail, plan for the parties and the meals and the guests and the pageants. But we can handle these tasks if we plan ahead, and we know our time frame; all our preparation concludes on December 25th, and then our task becomes putting everything away – unless you’re like some folks who leave their decorations up all year. Preparing for Christmas is something we can handle, given the time and energy.

But preparing for Christ? What does that entail? It entails not only being generous to our family and friends; it means being generous with everyone – in the chapter that follows today’s gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the sheep and the goats, of judgment day when the king will tell us, “inasmuch as you have done…” or not done. Preparing for Christ means forgiving not only our friends and family but our enemies as well. It means exuding that Christmas spirit not just to some but to all, and not for a month or two but all year round until Christ comes. We have to be ready at all times and in all circumstances…not much sleeping in heavenly peace under these conditions, is there?

In fact, preparing for Jesus is a job that involves all our time and all our energy everywhere we go. Doesn’t seem very fair, does it? Can’t we just attend a few extra worship services over the next month and consider it enough? Why does preparing for Jesus involve so much work? The answer: justice and love. Jesus comes into this world to live out God’s radical love, which is love for all people – regardless of race or religion or health or wealth or genes or gender. It is not a love that is restricted to our friends and family, but it is an all-encompassing love that reflects God’s love for all creation. It’s a love that does not discriminate, and therefore it is a just love. It is a love that will define the future kingdom of God as described by the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading from today, a kingdom where wars never occur as all people walk in the ways of the Lord. It’s a kingdom characterized by the love that Christ introduces to the world, a love that we are expected to model by offering ourselves for others, by caring for “the least of these” as well as the nearest and dearest. And we who profess faith in Jesus Christ show our love for him by living according to his wishes and expectations.

Which is why people tend to either fear the idea of Christ’s coming or dismiss the possibility of it ever happening. A Christian may fear Christ’s return precisely because we understand the nature of God’s love – it’s a parent’s love, and anyone who’s ever been brought up right knows that there are times when we do not look forward to our parent’s expression of love – like when we have been bad to our brother or sister or cousin. Yes, it is love when Mom or Dad give you that cold look and make it clear that you have done wrong. That is what we fear about Christ’s return. As David Lose puts it, “God's love for the vulnerable is the fierce love of a mother, and God's desire to protect all of God's children is the determined love of a father.” Our fear of Christ’s coming results from our failure to love as we are called to love. To stand in the way of such ferocious and determined love is to put yourself in harm’s way, so you best get with the program.

To fear Christ’s return is a better option than dismissing its possibility, which is what our culture tends to do. If Jesus is even included in our Christmas celebrations, he is relegated to a crib, seen as a sweet little baby, adored for a few weeks, then packed away for eleven months. We don’t think about his coming; only that he *came.* And we may not even be clear about *why* he came – perhaps just to show us how nice God is and prove himself to be God by rising from the dead, but we’re not at all clear on what that has to do with you or me. Was it all just so we can believe that Jesus was God in the flesh? If that’s all then I completely understand why our culture has pushed Jesus aside and brought in Santa and Frosty and Rudolph and the Grinch in his place – out of sight, out of mind as the saying goes. It’s enough for us to commemorate baby Jesus and carry on with our eating and drinking and merrymaking, as long as he’s not coming back. But we do so at our own risk. Jesus warns us in today’s reading to be prepared. For those who *are* prepared, Christ comes again as King; for the one caught up in the daily activities of eating and drinking and the like, with no heed for the kingdom of God, he comes as thief.[[1]](#footnote-1)

All this refers back to the whole reason for Jesus’ coming in the first place; to reign in God’s kingdom not at some point in the distant future but in the here and now. To the Christian, Christ not only has come and will come; he *is* come. I know that’s bad English, but you know what I mean. Christ has not disappeared until some future consummation of creation. He is here in the church, and he in our hearts as a present reality who lives and works in us and through us to transform this world into a world where his love and justice carry the day. The Church is Christ’s vehicle through which the Kingdom of God is established. To celebrate Christmas outside of the Church is not celebrating Christmas at all.

When we recognize Christ’s rule in our hearts, in our lives, we automatically prepare for his coming and we also lose our dread over that coming. A few years ago, my family came to stay with us for Christmas. Hyesun and I both recognize that my mom and her husband are far more meticulous that she or I, and so we prepared for their arrival weeks ahead of time, by cleaning the house, putting fresh sheets on the bed, preparing a menu and the like. I’m quite sure we were preparing up until the time of their arrival and still had some tasks unfinished, but that did not diminish the joy we felt upon their arrival at the parsonage. We rejoiced at their arrival, trusting in their graces that allowed them to not mention the dust bunnies under the sofa and not venture into the basement that had become a sanctuary for all things currently not-in-use. What mattered was not what was unfinished; what mattered was that they had arrived!

My message to you this morning: Don’t dread Christ’s coming. Do your best to be prepared, but welcome him as your king, the one who you serve! Don’t allow yourself to fall into a state of spiritual hibernation. We have to always be ready for Christ’s coming. And parents: don’t let your children fall asleep either. They need to see you actively preparing for Christ’s coming, actively loving “the least of these,” actively giving your time and talents and energy not only to them but to those who are in need, actively forgiving as God forgives. We begin this Advent season recognizing that it doesn’t really conclude on December 25th. It continues until God’s kingdom truly comes on earth as it is in heaven. May we prepare for Christ’s coming in joyful anticipation of the day we see him in fullness, a day when we can celebrate a rule of love and justice, a day that reminds us of what God started two thousand years ago when his Son first came into our world.

1. *David Lose, “The Undomesticated God (2010). Go to* [*http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1560*](http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1560) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)