

"I Believe He Will Come Again"
Sermon Series on the Apostles' Creed - #12
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(2 Pt. 3:3-14)

Introduction.

Do you remember Y2K? At the turn of the century, everyone was worried about the world shutting down because of the potential inability of computers to make the change when the calendar turned from 1999 to 2000. We're so dependent on computers to run the infrastructure of the world nowadays, and people were afraid that everything would shut down and life as we know it would come to a standstill. Some even predicted the end of the world – planes falling out of the sky and nuclear reactors having meltdowns.

At that time, I remember reading about a cult based in Denver, Colorado, called the Concerned Christians. The members of the group moved to Jerusalem so they could be there on January 1, 2000, for what they believed would be the end of the world. These cult members actually planned to instigate a shootout with police in Jerusalem on December 31st in an attempt to hasten the return of Christ. Fourteen members of the cult were arrested, and the rest of them were deported.

Ever since the creation of the atomic bomb in the 1940s, the end of the world has become a modern fear. And even more recently concerns about the environment have people wondering about the possibility of the end of life on this planet with global warming, the rate at which we're polluting the environment, and all the natural disasters that have rocked the earth in recent years.

In the midst of all this fear, the Second Coming of Christ has become the subject of serious conversation. Just look at the titles of the best-selling Christian books in the last several years. People are making a lot of money these days writing about this topic. I went Amazon.com and under the category of "books" I typed in the words "Second Coming of Christ," and the website brought up 1,725 titles! And if you Google the phrase, it brings up over 104 million results!

We're not alone in our generation with our concern about these matters. Millennial fever was hot 1,000 years ago at the turn of the first millennium, and people then were convinced they were living in the last days, too. And as we learn from our passage this morning, people who lived in the first century also had a keen interest in when the world would end and God's plan for the Second Coming.

What does the Apostles' Creed say about the Second Coming of Jesus, and what does Scripture teach in this regard? This morning we're going to consider

the phrase of the Creed which says, "...and He will come again to judge the living and the dead."

I. The Promise of Christ's Return.

"You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this "coming" He promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'.... But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief" (3:3,4,8,10).

The apostle Peter says that there two equal and opposite errors we should avoid whenever we think about the return of Jesus. The first error is to presume that Christ will not in fact return, that this doctrine of the church is a myth, that it's just wishful thinking. In Peter's day there were those who scoffed at the notion of a literal return of Christ, and they mocked the idea of the Lord's Second Coming.

In our own day there are people who think that this whole idea of Jesus returning to the earth was just made up by the early followers of Jesus. But the apostle Peter makes a reference here in our passage in 2 Peter 3 to the way in which the people of Noah's day made the same mistake in presuming that God would not visit them with judgment, and their unpreparedness cost them everything.

We should note the fact that in the NT there are over 300 references to the Second Coming of Christ – about 1 in every 13 verses! Now, compare that with the fact that baptism is mentioned only 19 times in the NT, and the Lord's Supper is mentioned clearly only 4 times, and you can see that the writers of the NT had a great belief in the reality of Christ's return. It was a matter of conviction, and it was a cause for hope in the early church.

A second error Peter said we should avoid is to become preoccupied with the Second Coming of Christ. There are Christians today who have become so consumed with the idea of the Lord's return that they spend an inordinate amount of time developing charts and assigning dates in order to determine the exact moment of Jesus return. They focus too much on the Second Coming and fail to develop a balanced view of what the Bible has to say about this. For example, when I was a young Christian Hal Lindsey wrote a book entitled *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and more recently there have been the *Left Behind* series of books.

One of the most famous examples of this preoccupation in American history is a guy named William Miller, who set a certain date for Christ's return in 1843. His followers, who were called "Millerites," put on white robes and early in the

morning on the appointed date and they climbed up on the top of their houses to await Christ's return with the sunrise. But nothing happened. Then Miller announced that he had made a miscalculation of one year and that the Second Coming would take place the same date the following year. Again, his followers put on their white robes, climbed to the roofs of their homes, and waited. But nothing happened again, except the dawn of another day.¹

Last week in our study of Acts 1 we saw the way in which Jesus Himself said, *"It is not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by His own authority."* Elsewhere Jesus told His disciples no one knows the day or the hour – not the angels, not even Christ Himself. The apostle Peter indicates in our passage that the Second Coming of Jesus will be like a thief in the night – you don't expect him; he comes as a surprise. Therefore, we shouldn't spend a lot of time and energy trying to figure out dates and times. Instead, we should live our lives as though Christ could come back any day, at any time, but we should also plan our lives as though He may yet tarry another thousand years.

There was a young man who was being examined for ordination as a minister, and someone on the committee asked him his views about the end times. They asked the candidate, "Are you premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial in your views of when the Lord will return?" referring to the thousand- year reign of Christ predicted in the Bible after Jesus returns. The young man thought for a moment and then he said, "Well, really I'm panmillennial in my view." "Panmillennial? What's that?" a woman asked. And the young man replied, "Well, I'm panmillennial. I think it's all going to pan out in the end!" That's a very wise approach.

The Apostles' Creed is short and to the point. It says, "And He will come again." It wisely says very little about the events surrounding the final events of the Lord's return. That's because wherever the Bible does speak of these things, it does so only in images and metaphors which are somewhat mysterious and enigmatic. The books of Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Jesus' own words in the Gospels speak of fantastic creatures, life-giving rivers, and lakes of fire. They tell of trumpets sounding and bowls of wrath being poured out on the earth.

It's difficult to claim with any certainty the clear meaning of these matters, so the Creed is correct in refusing to engage in speculation with regard to some of the more intriguing questions we may have about the Second Coming. Instead, it focuses simply on the **fact** of the Lord's return, not on the **how** of it, and there is room for disagreement in the body of Christ on the particulars.

II. The Promise of Christ's Judgment.

While the Apostles' Creed and the Bible itself refuse to speculate too precisely on the details of Jesus' return, there are elements of the event which the writers of Scripture address with some degree of certainty. For example, our passage in 2 Peter says, "*[The people of Noah's day] deliberately forgot that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water. By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment.... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare*" (3:5,6,7,10).

The Bible says that you and I are living in between two visits to our planet by the Son of God. The first time Jesus came as a helpless infant through the miracle of the Incarnation. At His first coming Jesus was the Suffering Servant who the OT prophets predicted would bring salvation to the world. But in His final return, at the Second Coming, the Bible says that Jesus will come again in power and glory and in a way that no one has ever seen before. He will come as the conquering king, and He will come to judge the earth. He will come in righteousness, and all the peoples of the earth will all be assembled before His throne of justice.

I remember as a boy, whenever we recited the Apostles' Creed which used older traditional language I was a little bit frightened, not only because of the language about God's judgment, but also because I wondered if I would be quick enough when the Lord returned! I didn't realize that the word "quick" comes from the Old English word *cwic*, which means "alive." Our English word "quicken," which refers to the movement of an unborn baby in a mother's womb, has the same root. The reference is to those who are alive at the time of Christ's Second Coming as well as those who have died prior to His return.

Jesus is going to come again, but when He comes, what will He do? Scripture tells us that when Jesus returns to the earth a second time, there are actually five things He will do. **First**, *He will come to claim His own*. Jesus will come back in order that those who have committed their lives to Him might share in His glory and be with Christ for all eternity.

The **second** thing the Bible says Jesus will do when He returns is *reward His people*. In 2 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul says that Christ will honor those who have served Him faithfully, and He will reward them for the things they have done for the Lord in service to Christ.

Third, Jesus will *reveal His glory and His sovereignty*. When Christ returns, He will demonstrate on a cosmic scale His total and absolute lordship. Every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Fourth, Christ will *exercise His judgment*. All of our actions, all of our thoughts and intentions, all the things we have done and left undone in this life will be laid bare before the Lord of heaven.

And the **final** thing Christ will do when He returns is *a new work of restoration* and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

Notice that the Creed makes reference to the fourth thing Christ will do in the list. Most people aren't very comfortable with all this talk about God's judgment, and we prefer to focus on the love and the mercy of God. We like the notion of the Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the forgiving father in the parable of the prodigal son, but the idea of His coming with fire to judge all people is somewhat frightening. But there is no getting around the reality of God's judgment. It's a corollary to His holiness and His justice.

Just as you and I get angry when we hear about someone abusing children, or discover the truth about human trafficking these days, or learn about the awful history of slavery in America, in the same way God grows angry over the sin of humanity. He has a profound sense of righteous indignation, and a holy God will judge sin. One day each of us will have to give an account for the way in which we have lived our lives and the decisions we have made, and it will be a day of judgment.

However, let me be quick to add the good news in all of this is that when we stand before the bar of God's justice, those of us who have claimed Jesus as our Lord and Savior will have an Advocate, a defense attorney who will plead our case – Jesus Christ Himself. This is how the apostle Paul put it, *"There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus....Who will bring a charge against those who God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is He that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us"* (Rom. 8:1,33,34).

In the days when the pioneers were settling the western part of this country, whenever they saw that a prairie fire coming they did something unusual. Since not even the fastest horses could outrun a fire when it is blown across the prairie, the pioneers would take a match and they would actually burn the grass in a large designated area around them. Then they would take their stand in that burned out area, and in that circle they would be safe from the threatening prairie fire. And the reason for this was because fire had already passed over the place where they stood.

When the judgment of God comes, there is only one spot that will be safe. Nearly two thousand years ago the wrath of God was poured out on the cross of Calvary, and there Jesus bore all of God's judgment that should have fallen upon us. Today, if you and I take our stand at the foot of the cross, we will be safe for all time and eternity. Do it today, friend. Only the person who truly understands

the reality of God's judgment is the one who is can fully appreciate the magnitude of His mercy because of the cross.

Conclusion.

You and I need not fear the judgment of God. Those of us who know, love and follow Jesus Christ have been redeemed, and the fire of God's judgment will pass over us because of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Our job is to prepare for Jesus' coming and to look expectantly for that hopeful day.

I close with this. Earnest Shackleton was a remarkable explorer of the South Pole during what is called the Heroic Era of Antarctic Exploration. In 1916 he left behind a few men on Elephant Island while he went off to explore another territory, and he told them he would come back to get them and to be ready when he did. However, when he returned, there was a blockade of ice bergs that would not allow the ship to get into the bay. He was worried about how he would rescue his men.

Then, as if by a miracle, one day an opening occurred in the ice bergs. He raced in with the boat, picked up the men, who were in fact ready, and they got out just before the ice bergs crashed back together again. He said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go."

They replied, "We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded one another, 'The boss may come today!'"²

Let's make that phrase our own as the followers of Jesus Christ. "The boss may come today!" Make the most of every day, because it may be your last. Maintain a readiness should the Lord return this very hour. Live in the light of eternity, and don't be afraid. The boss may come today!

¹Cited in William B. Ward, *Beliefs That Live*, p. 73.

²Adapted from a sermon by Jim Singleton, "He Will Come Again."