

In-Between the Two Advents

A Sermon for the Season of Advent

Sermon Prayer, Repentance and the Spiritual Life 4 December 2022, second Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:9

2 Peter 3:9-10

Isaiah 11:6-9

Sermon for the second Sunday in Advent

Today is the second Sunday in Advent. Advent means waiting in faith. Incidentally, we are Christians living in the 'in-between' period of the First Advent, which was waiting for the Messiah, Jesus Christ, fulfilled two thousand and twenty-two years ago, and the Second Advent, in which we expect His second coming and the day of judgement. Like the first, this too will be accomplished when the time is right for God. The picture we get from the two Advent periods is almost like looking in a mirror and seeing a reverse image. We are presented with the ministry of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit flowing in reverse order from Jesus Christ's Second Coming to His first coming. Therefore, I chose the title 'In-Between the Two Advents' for today's message. However, I have taken due care to incorporate the theme for today in this sermon. We will examine how waiting for the Messiah has looked in the past, and how it looks to us now. What needs to be borne in mind is that during this 'in-between' time we should hasten to prepare ourselves to be ready for Christ's return.

'In-between' is rather a strange place to be in. Think about a few of the in-between times in your life. What was it like to be there? What feelings did it create in you? Was it fear of the unknown, anxiety, uncertainty, or hope and anticipation of something better? We may even respond to 'in-between' times with impatience. "Let us just get this over with. I am tired of waiting." The disciples of Jesus experienced some of these feelings in the three days between our Lord's death and His resurrection. They felt hopeless and helpless. The One in Whom they had placed their hope and trust, the One Whom they acknowledged as God's Son, was dead. They felt the weight of their grief and despair. They were facing a huge boulder in their path, and had no idea what the future held for them.

As we pass through the First Advent and look forward to the Second, let us settle the impending question of when the end times will come. I am not an end-time alarmist. I want to argue that all of us need to be cheerful about the end time, and about the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. It would sound oxymoronic when we say that Christ's Second Coming can be at any time now, and in the same breath that it is delayed — two positions in direct contradiction. To understand eschatology, which is the theology concerning death, judgement, and the final destiny of the human soul, we need to go back to the beginning and study the time it took God to incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. As early as the book of Genesis, God already had a plan for the future. Our earliest ancestors, Adam and Eve, fell into sin in the Garden of Eden. As soon as God had them admit to their disobedience, God already had a plan for renewal. Through the coming of the Saviour, all mankind would have hope for the future, and be rescued from damnation. Here, in the Garden of Eden, God spoke of the coming of our Saviour.

Normally, during the four weeks of Advent, many of us go through our own versions of preparation to get ready for Christmas. We set up Christmas trees and decorate them with lights, fancy ornaments, and perhaps a star on top. We purchase gifts for our loved ones, in honour and remembrance of the gifts brought to Jesus by the wise men. We narrate the much-spoken Nativity story, in church and elsewhere. However, our great God had His own way of preparing for the First Advent. His preparations took longer than a day, a week, or a month. His preparations required thousands of people, and many thousands of centuries, to complete. It was not an accident that the incarnation happened at a certain moment in history. It was a meticulously planned event, designed to change the history of the world. The coming of Christ was well rehearsed, and projected centuries earlier, all by an omniscient God. Yes, the incarnation took enormous planning: a righteous virgin, a carpenter from an obscure town, a pagan emperor taking a census, a journey, and a manger. But Jesus did not come just to give us a good story to be re-told year after year. The Father sent His one and only Son, His begotten Son, for one reason: for the redemption and Salvation of all who would believe in Him. And for us, if the incarnation and redemption are of the past, Salvation is of the unknown future. We wait in anticipation that Jesus will justify us in Salvation on the day history ends.

The first coming of the Messiah would not have had the same impact on us had He come soon after the first sin in Eden. It would have been like getting fined for speeding, and having the policeman immediately take the ticket back and let you go. You would forget about the violation you committed, and go on speeding when you got another chance. We needed to learn about ourselves. God saw this, and built time into His preparations. God's people needed to grow before they could receive Christ. They had to explore their world, and explore their faith, before the world was ready for Jesus. Although the elements were present in the Garden of Eden, time was a tool that worked towards the economy of God's plans. God chose this time to institute His covenants, to show His people the truth through His chosen people and the prophets. In this way the scripture validated itself, and His plan is revealed to us bit by bit. Much of the Old Testament is the story of a people not yet ready to receive the coming Messiah. Much of the in-between time appears to be found wanting in the Christians' preparations to receive the Lord at His Second Coming. Therefore, the looming question is: will we be ready?

None of the Old Testament prophets, I must say, had provided the full picture of what was to come. Then John the Baptist appears on the scene. His prophetic ministry was unique in its scope and detail, in announcing the Messiah. However, we see that John's ministry was telescoped into the much greater and divine ministry of God the Son, Jesus Christ.

The message of the 'in-between' period is one of hope for deliverance from all the chains that bind us: deliverance from the bondage of our sins and manifold obstinacies, deliverance from the blindness and deafness of heart and mind which keep us from the truth of God. It is a message of hope for Christ's Kingdom of righteousness and peace, and hope for a renewed life in Jesus. As the 'in-between' period people of God, we hope that at His Second Coming He would take us to His new Creation. We see how well the ministry of John is dovetailed with the ministry of our Lord: His birth, His teachings, His substitutionary death on the Cross, His resurrection, ascension, and the fulfilment of His promise of His Holy Spirit to indwell in us during this period. He knew we could never sustain the strains of this period without the help of the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist is an unlikely relative for our Lord to have. Mark and John both introduce him right at the start of their Gospels, and he arrives almost without warning — the solitary voice crying out in the wilderness. Everything about him marks him out: his clothing was a rough garment of camel's hair with a leather belt, and his food was whatever the wilderness itself provided, locusts and wild honey. He kept no company, sought no comforts, and showed no interest in pleasing anyone. Had he turned up at our church door, we might have hesitated to let him near the pulpit. Yet God chose exactly this man to stand at the hinge between the Old Testament and the New, the last of the prophets and the first to point, directly and by name, to the Messiah who was already among them. He knew precisely who he was and precisely what he had been sent to do.

John's business was to unsettle people, not to comfort them. "Repent," he cried, "and prepare the way of the Lord." He meant it as much for us as for the crowds who first heard him.

Many who came to him at the Jordan seem to have imagined that hearing a few of his sermons and then being baptised was all that was asked of them. John would have none of it. When the crowd came out to him, he called them, bluntly, "a generation of vipers," and demanded that they show, by the way they lived, that they had actually turned from their sins: "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Luke 3:9). Even King Herod was not spared; John confronted him openly over his conduct, and it cost John his life in the end. Whatever else may be said of him, nobody could call John the Baptist a diplomat, and nobody could accuse him of softening the truth to keep the peace.

It is an uncomfortable message to hear at this time of year. These last weeks before Christmas are given over to festivity and good cheer, and we would much rather set aside, for a while, our anxieties about the world, our sicknesses and griefs, and simply enjoy the carols and the familiar story of a baby born in a manger. Talk of sin and judgement feels entirely out of season. We remind ourselves that Christ has already died for us, that our sins are already forgiven, and we wonder what more there is to say. Were I to press the point as directly as John did, and speak of the particular sins each of us carries, I suspect we would none of us thank me for it, any more than Herod thanked John.

And yet John cannot simply be waved away. As long as we persuade ourselves that there is nothing seriously wrong in us, we keep Jesus at arm's length, for, as Scripture says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Unless we are willing to hear John's hard words and take seriously his warning of a coming judgement, we will never fully grasp just how much it cost God to deal with our sin by becoming, for our sake, a helpless infant in a manger.

John knew his place in the present, as he pointed to and prepared for the One Who would be the future. He never took his sacrifices for granted. The crowds came, and his congregation grew, but as soon as Jesus began to preach, John withdrew to the wings, and the spotlight shifted. "He must increase, I must decrease," John asserted. There is not one trace of jealousy, not one ounce of envy. He did not forgive anyone; he left that to God the Son, Jesus Christ.

Moving on to Jesus, we learn that He submitted to a horrific sacrificial death on the Cross, and redeemed us. He walked, carrying the cumulative burden of the sins of humanity for centuries, right from the

Garden of Eden towards the Cross. Remember how keenly He taught us, from the mountain top, sitting on the bow of the boat, in the Temple and the synagogue, and even while walking on the water. He also spoke to us in the upper room on the eve of His death. His message is loud and clear. He is returning in glory on the day of judgement. He will take all who confess Him, and who live as He expects, into His Kingdom. Can we take this message lightly? Yes, my friends, Christ's return is imminent; it could happen at any moment, and it could happen when we least expect it.

Peter, perhaps, had the situation worked out for us when he said, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." — 2 Peter 3:9-10. The tension of the 'in-between' times will be broken by the reality of our Lord's Second Coming, to take us to His new Creation, at an unexpected moment.

Isaiah prophesied about the new Creation. Please read chapter 11, verses 6 to 9. It goes on: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb... and a little child shall lead them... and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy... for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD..." I want to be in such a place — do not you?

While we are waiting in expectation, we should love and glorify Jesus Christ. Jesus poses a question here: He asked, "And why call ye Me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). He tells us how: 'for I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.' Then He tells them, 'Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.' The point of this parable is the importance of serving where service is needed. Such love for others glorifies Jesus by reflecting our love for Him. Remember, the yardstick of our righteousness is how well we reflect Jesus Christ.

To summarise, God will separate His obedient followers from pretenders and unbelievers. The real evidence of our beliefs is the way we act and live. Admittedly, treating everyone we encounter as if they were Jesus is no easy task. What we do for others demonstrates what we think about Christ's words to us. The question before us today is: how well is our preparation working out for Christ's Second Coming? Friends, we cannot miss the crown after running the race so far. We should not think that God's seemingly infinite patience is an opportunity to put off making sure our life is right with the Lord. This is what living in the 'in-between' times, and waiting through the Second Advent, is all about.

Amen.