

“Is Jesus coming?”
Making sense of ultimate things

November 6, 2011

Text: Psalm 70, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

I.

Our text this morning from **1 Thessalonians** is one of those challenging texts that preachers often shy away from. The Apostle Paul is responding to a concern in the Thessalonica church about *the coming of the Lord*—the Second Coming if Christ—and its implications for their loved ones who have already died ... and for themselves as well.

Is Jesus coming? We don't normally use this sort of language in our church, nor in our *United Church of Christ* denomination.

I know he's coming in a Bethlehem manger like he does every year in late December. I know Christ lives again at Easter, and the Holy Spirit comes upon the gathered faithful at Pentecost. But, again, **is Jesus coming?**

1 Thessalonians was the Apostle Paul's first letter written probably right around fifty in the Common Era. In his earlier letters, as we see this morning, there are references to the *Second Coming*, to the very real expectation that Jesus would be coming again.

CHECK IT OUT: *For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and we will be with the Lord forever.

In a literal sense, this is hard to swallow, isn't it? To the wider, secular world its prospect seems like so much hocus-pocus.

- It's seems far-fetched, over-the-top, running against all logic and reason.
- How's he going to come again?
- He already came, was crucified on a cross—dead and buried ... and lives again in the joy and wonder of *the Easter experience*.

And as we have seen, people have been anticipating the return of the Lord for two centuries, often times setting precise dates on which Christ's return would take place. And of course, those dates have all come and gone. At the same time—no doubt—new dates have been proclaimed.

II.

What our reading this morning suggests is that while the Thessalonian Christians believed Jesus would return, their immediate concern was what this meant for their loved ones who had already died. When Jesus returns and God's salvation bursts forth from the heavens, what's going to happen with them?

In his letter, Paul wants to reassure the Thessalonians and console them in their concern about the fate of their deceased loved ones. That's all understandable. And he not only reassures them that their loved ones will be rescued in Jesus' return, but that *these dead in Christ will rise first*.

In the BIG PICTURE of things, what this is about is HOPE and our human concern for *ultimate things*. As human beings, how can we not wonder about the end, about the end of our lives and the lives of our loved ones?

What we want is to be reassured—reassured that we'll be together with God and with our loved ones; reassured that we're going to be okay.

Listen to Thessalonians on this—verse 17:

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air ...

Okay, that's kind of hard to get our modern brains around. But then, check out the final words of this verse: ***and so we will be with the Lord forever.***

You see, *that's what it's all about*. We want to be reassured that we're going to be together—with God, for sure, and with our loved ones. That's what had the Thessalonians all concerned to begin with on this matter of *ultimate things*. They were concerned that their loved ones who had already died would not experience the blessings of Christ's return.

III.

But what about us today? **Is Jesus coming?** If empirical proof has any persuasion with us, *it doesn't seem so*. But if we can get beyond a literal reading of this text, in a larger sense, isn't Jesus always coming? Isn't God always coming? Isn't the Holy Spirit always breaking forth upon us with new energy and new meanings. In the narrative of the Bible, God is always coming.

1. That was the hope of the Israelites living under the oppressive hand of Pharaoh in Egypt—that God would come and rescue them. And of course, God did—through Moses and the Exodus.

2. And during Babylonian Exile ... through the preaching of Second Isaiah—again—there was the riveting HOPE that God was coming; that there would be a highway in the desert ... and ...

*Every valley shall be lifted up ... and every mountain be made low.
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed (from Isaiah 40).*

Like all apocalyptic literature in the Bible, of which *the Second Coming* is an example, what this is about is HOPE. The idea of the Second Coming is rooted in a social hope.

IV.

When a people are in dire straights ... CHECK IT OUT ...

- when the heavy arm of oppression is all about ...
- when one's present circumstance in life offers no hope for a better life, for a better tomorrow ...
- when tomorrow, and the next day, promise nothing more than one more day of misery and degradation,

... it's understandable that some poet or visionary among the people would, over time, envision a better day. The language of the apocalyptic is language for a better day. It's metaphor and hyperbole; but its all about speaking hope to the fears and anxieties of people.

Who among us does not have questions and concerns about *ultimate things*?

- What's going to happen when we die?
- What happens to our loved ones who have already died?
- How does it all play out? Are we going to be reunited with our loved ones?
- Are we going to all be together—one happy family, wrapped in the spirit of the living Christ in the warmth and wonder of God's all-embracing spirit?

Our unambiguous answer to this question is YES.

The point for us today is that this *new life* is always coming. The appeal of *the Second Coming* for us is that God is always coming, Jesus is always coming, the Holy Spirit is always coming. Indeed, love is always coming.

In all of this, hope is always on the horizon, an imminent reality. We are never alone, never abandoned, never cast aside, never NOT included in whatever God's salvation is. This is what the children of God want and need to hear in every era of time.

- We want to be together—with God, with our loved ones.
- We don't want to be abandoned. We don't want to be alone.

V.

Is Jesus coming? Absolutely! You can't hold God back. Jesus is always coming in the sense that God is always in the process of giving life, of reconciling differences and of bringing light in the midst of darkness.

God comes to us at Christmas in a Bethlehem manger. God comes to us at Easter, through an awful cross, warming our hearts with the powerful hope of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. What was dead is somehow alive. His disciples and most ardent followers could feel it in their hearts.

Remember the comment of two of Jesus' disciples, in Luke's gospel—after the resurrection—on the Emmaus Road ... when Christ had appeared to them in spirit. Later, reflecting back on their experience, they said:

Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?

The hope of *the Second Coming* is linked inextricably to this life-giving experience of the risen Christ. It is unwavering HOPE.

1. Hope that endings—all the time—are but a prelude to new beginnings.
2. Hope that you can't hold God back.
3. Hope that you can't keep LOVE from breaking upon the world, lifting us intimately into God's presence.

Hope that we and our loved ones will be with the Lord forever.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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