

## What Child IS This?

December 1, 2013

Matthew 24:36-44

Men, if you want to drive your family crazy and especially your wife, call home from somewhere telling the family to get ready because someone is coming to dinner. Then hang up.

They don't know who is coming, or when, whether it is someone important, or maybe a relative, a good friend, a total stranger.

There will be high suspense, and maybe a few other emotions as well, until you walk in the door with this person.

We light the first candle on the Advent wreath this morning as a signal that someone is coming and we have 4 weeks to get ready. But ready for who?? Who is coming??

Our first item of business this Advent season is to answer the question posed by a carol we hear a lot this time of year - what child is this?

What child is this who is coming? What does he mean for us? How will we accept him? Does he get confused with someone else's coming?

Because I would imagine if we ask most children who is coming they might answer with another song that is sung often during this advent season: "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town!"

Well, during this first Sunday of Advent, let's look at this question. What child is this who is coming into our midst at Christmas time?

You know, it is sort of funny, that the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of the church year, has a text that looks at the end instead of the beginning.

Our gospel text deals with the end of time, the time of God's final judgment upon the earth. Perhaps it's not the kind of message you expect at the time we normally think of as the beginning.

But I think it is very appropriate for us to begin here, because as we learn about this child and his message for us, we will be more ready to accept this message and live in this message if we understand the meaning of what we usually refer to as the Second Coming.

I spoke a couple of Sundays ago about the second coming of Christ, and how that concept is often misunderstood and misinterpreted.

But is that even the correct terminology? Does this mean that Christ has not fully come into our world and that we need another, a second coming?

Rector Bill Adams of Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA. wrote these words: "We so often speak of the Second Coming of Christ.... Frankly I don't know where we got such terminology..... The phrase Second Coming does not appear anywhere in the Bible....

The Bible proclaims loudly and clearly that the Christ...came into the world as a human being and is still in the world in the form of the Holy Spirit.

The inherent problem with a phrase like Second Coming is that it carries the implication of not here yet.

But Jesus Christ is not stuck in traffic.... Our Redeemer wasn't sent to us with the wrong zip code... delayed until the Postal Department gets their act together..... the Word of God is present in everything and everyone.... everywhere.... right now!

Advent isn't a season where we hang out for a while until Christmas happens.... Advent is a season where we learn once again to be an expectant people..... a people who anticipate.... a people who read the signs....a people who look painstakingly for the invasion of Christmas everywhere! "

I think Bill is correct, that Christ is here now, and it is the final expression of Christ that comes at the end of time. Again, as we talked about before, that "end" is not necessarily the end of creation. But for each of us, there is a personal end, and a judgment.

We don't know the time of that judgment. But scripture tells us to be ready.

So, then, who is coming? It is a child who comes now and is here now. It is the child in whom lies the promise of God.

This coming is the fulfilling of God's promise of salvation, of a new creation through Jesus the Christ. There is joy as well as readiness, or watchfulness in this coming.

This child is the one who brings the hope and the promise of eternal salvation for those who are waiting and believing.

"David Peterson, former pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Spokane, Washington, told about a time when he was preparing his sermon. His little daughter came in and said, "Daddy, can we play?"

He answered, "I'm awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I'm right in the middle of preparing this sermon. In about an hour I can play." She said, "Okay, when you're finished, Daddy, I am going to give you a great big hug." He said, "Thank you very much."

She went to the door and (these are his words) "Then she did a U-turn and came back and gave me a chiropractic, bone-breaking hug."

David said to her, "Darling, you said you were going to give me a hug after I finished."

She answered, "Daddy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!"

One meaning of Advent and Christmas is that God wants us to know, through this First Coming, how much we have to look forward to with him in eternity.

What child is this? He is the child who comes now and will continue to come into this world to bring hope and salvation.

We must trust in his promise of salvation for our time and for the future. We must trust and believe in that promise as we live in these in between times - the times between his coming at Christmas and our time of entering into eternity.

A young boy pulled his sled through unfamiliar streets late one winter afternoon, delivering newspapers for his best friend. It had been snowing all day and sidewalks were not shoveled. Very few houses had outside lights on, so the unknown addresses were invisible.

He had a list in his mittened hands, but after two hours it was soggy and unreadable. Only ten papers left and he had no idea where they went.

He stopped under a streetlight and looked up into its comforting glow, then looked down at his list. All the light showed was something that looked like an "X" surrounded by blue ink stains. He sat down on the sled and started to cry.

"Something wrong, Son?" asked an old man who happened by. After hearing the problem, the man looked at the list. "That's an x all right. It must be Paxton and one of those papers must be mine. The boy handed him a paper apologizing.

"Why don't you give me the rest of them, too?," said the man. "I can drop them off on my way home." The old man took the papers and disappeared around the corner.

The boy wasn't sure he should have trusted a stranger, but he was too relieved to worry about it. The next day his friend said no one had complained so he knew his trust was well-placed, but he still wasn't sure where Paxton Street was. "

And that is the point, we don't have to be sure - only be in Christ. It is Christ who makes the promises to us that the Kingdom he began on Easter morning will come to its completion some day.

When, we don't know. How? We don't know. But we must trust, place our life in his hands. So a big part of what Advent is all about is expectation.

When you were preparing for church this morning, you probably expected to hear God's word proclaimed, prayers said, songs sung, and all of the other things we normally do in our worship service.

You probably expected that I would be preaching a sermon about Advent or the coming of Jesus today.

Even when we don't consciously think about it, we do live on the basis of expectations.

Based on our experiences, our beliefs, and, yes, our actions, we expect or believe that certain things will happen.

Expectation can be passive or active. We can just sort of sit back and wait for what we expect to happen, or we can do things which have a direct bearing on what will happen.

When expectation is active, it is called vision.

This is the beginning of the Christian Year, this first Sunday in Advent, and we are not that far away from the beginning of a new calendar year, a new year that is filled with unlimited possibilities and potential.

A year from now, some of us will be far ahead of where we are today, some of us will be in the same place, and some of us will have slipped even further behind.

This will be true in both the natural and spiritual parts of our lives. A lot of where we are now, and where we're going in 2014 will be determined by our vision.

I define vision as seeing yourself reaching a goal that will better prepare you to handle and to enjoy life in the future. We all need a vision to receive what God has for us. There are things God wants us to have, but because we lack vision, we settle for a whole lot less.

What is your vision for the days ahead? What is your vision for your finances? What is your vision for your Bible knowledge? What is your vision for the relationships you are involved in? What is your vision for your walk with the Lord?

What is your vision for this church and for your role in this church? What is your vision for being used by God to win others for Christ? What is that you would like to see God do differently for you?

Even more important, what is that you would like to do differently for God?

Chances are, those without a vision will do the same thing this year as last year, with few, if any, changes in results.

Every vision has to consider that there are some unknown things that might happen that may cause the vision to make certain adjustments.

Our scripture passage this morning is found in the context of Jesus' teachings on being prepared for when He might come again – in new ways to us, perhaps to some for the first time.

As we go through this Advent season, as we go through our preparations to celebrate the occasion of Jesus' first coming, we need to be reminded by today's scripture of our need to be ready for Jesus to come again.

Not necessarily in the sense of a physical appearance, and we've talked about that before. But of Christ's coming into each of our lives in a way that will make a powerful difference in the way we think and act.

God acted at Christmas, and continues to act through Easter, and will continue to act in human hearts and lives through everyone's last days.

So what child is this? God's child, who acts upon our lives today, tomorrow and forever!