

THE FOUR COMINGS OF CHRIST

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Today, a joy to share with you a Christmas message. “The Four Comings of Christ.” The message was suggested to me really in my mind some weeks ago as the advent wreath was placed in the church. On the church calendar there are four Sundays of advent which speak of the Lord’s coming. In each successive Sunday although we’re not a symbolic church as a rule we have lit a candle. Sometimes the scriptures do point out the value of symbolism and the scriptures employ symbolism. Where it elicit our worship it can be helpful.

There are though these comings of Christ which are seen in the scripture and which I wish to share with you this morning.

The first coming of Christ is the coming of which today we have heard portions of The Messiah speak of. In Luke 2 we had read about. It is the coming of the baby in Bethlehem. While there is a simplicity of the telling of the story in the gospels we never can escape from the shattering implications, the mind boggling implications of what it is for the God who dwells in unapproachable light and who is spirit to take upon himself not only the form of human nature but human nature its very self.

This summer while I was going through an article in *The National Geographic* magazine on the size of the universe which I’ve commented on the article once on a Sunday night earlier this past summer. But one thing which I didn’t share at that time which really strikes me now in regard to the miracle of Christmas is that in the *National Geographic* article there was a picture of what it would be like if you had a camera vantage point from someplace in the universe where with one shot of the camera you could take the whole universe in one picture. The backdrop of the photo or the likeness of the photo in *National Geographic* was black. Throughout the blackness there were flecks of white. In some cases small swirls of light which represented the millions of galaxies which are in existence in the observable universe from man’s observation point.

Somewhere in the middle of this whole thing there was an arrow pointing in the photo to an extremely small speck of light. I believe to the southwest of the center of the picture. The small speck was identified as earth.

Somehow the God who is outside of time and space, that is the edge of the observable universe is ten billion light years but the God who exists outside of all of that has chosen to identify with this small speck in this universe. To identify it in a way that he has chosen not to identify with any other part of his universe. To identify with it by giving creative life on this earth the possibility of choice. When the choice is made sending himself in the person of his Son to be a part of our existence. It is staggering to think and to imagine that the God who is Spirit, who exists outside the dimension of time and space has at Christmas entered our world

His coming was greeted – his first coming was greeted with responses with which his coming is still being greeted. I would note these in the Christmas story.

One response which we cannot help but see in the Christmas story is the response of hostility to the Christ child. That response is marked of course by the person Herod, Herod the Great. The first of the four Herods of the New Testament. Herod is near the end of his life at this point. In

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fact, after the birth of Christ, Herod only lives two or three more years and then he passes from the scene. His life had been checkered by violence, by cruel manipulation, by the ability to maintain his delicate position as ruler over the area through political ties with Rome which were forged upon chicanery which were forged upon glut. And in fact, this Herod whom we encounter in the gospel of Matthew is a person who is so suspicious of revolts within his own family that the one wife which he loved, Miriam, among the many which he had he was responsible for executing her and the two sons born to him and her whom he thought were plotting against him. The death of his wife, the death of his two sons, occurred before the birth of the Christ child.

Therefore it's not surprising when one reads the narrative in Matthew to find that this Herod being suspicious of any king would order the slaughter of the innocents. He thought it nothing to kill people he did not know if indeed he thought it nothing to kill people whom he loved.

Augustus Caesar who was emperor of Rome at the time of the birth of Christ remarked after the execution by Herod of Herod's wife and children "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son." When Herod gives the orders for the children of Bethlehem to be slaughtered as so often as has been the case in history the soldier's march to carry out the orders, never questioning why but simply carrying out the orders. It is reminiscent of the phrase used in recent years, What if they gave a war and nobody came?

But the world is like that. There is hostility there are persons who carry out violent orders. And Herod when he seeks in his hostility to bring an act against the Christ child he's only acting consistently with his whole life pattern.

There is another response to the coming of the baby in Bethlehem. That is the response of indifference, which is markedly different from hostility.

The indifference is seen I think most strikingly in the narrative of Christ's birth in Matthew 2 where the wise men come from the east and they inquire "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" Herod did not know so he summoned the theological and biblical experts of the day, the chief priests and the scribes. He asked them, where would he be born? Their response from the prophet Micah what we know as 5:2, was that in Bethlehem of Judea the Christ would be born.

The wise men take this piece of information and act upon it to go to Bethlehem to seek to worship the Christ child.

However, the chief priests and the scribes who know intellectually where the place is never act upon their knowledge. They are simply indifferent let the wise men go. Their action is so indicative of their life pattern. For in their lives religion was a game. It was a position. It was a vocation. It was something to be argued about. It was something to be protected. It was something to be carried out.

But the personal reality and the presence of God, obedience and loyalty and love and worship, were absent. Thus the custodians of the greatest knowledge of the world where he could be found although knowing it do nothing of it.

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How like the chief priests and the scribes we are tempted to become who in the Christian life are the custodians of the document, the written word. Who know in verbiage and in language the truth of the Christ child.

How careful we must be lest we become indifferent to the reality of his presence in the world.

The coming of Christ is not only greeted by hostility and indifference but his first coming is also greeted with the response of worship.

We see such beautiful examples of lives unfold before us in the birth narratives of our Lord. Persons like for example, Zechariah and Elizabeth, that older couple. Or perhaps in their late middle years, who desperately wanted a child but to whom no child had been born. Yet not giving up in hope they continued in prayer. When the child, John the Baptist is born, who is to be the forerunner of the Messiah, one can feel and sense the joy that comes to Zechariah and Elizabeth as they welcomed that act of God in their lives.

And Mary and Joseph, once the initial difficulties are understood respond to the advent of our Lord with worship and joy. Mary sings the great song of blessing to the Lord.

The shepherds are surprised by joy. They have not been looking for anything special to happen. But when it is revealed to them by the angels they immediately respond with haste and with worship.

And Simeon and Anna, I think two of the most delightful people in all of the scripture. If I had anybody I would want to identify with in scripture other than the Lord it would be Simeon and Anna whose story is told in Luke 2. Those two delightful senior citizens who every day came to the temple to worship. Whose lives in growing old had never lost hope. They expected the Christ to come. When he came they recognized him and they worshipped him and they responded.

Then of course there is the wise men. These who came from the East in seeing his star acted upon what knowledge they had and responded with gifts of thoughtfulness and cost.

These individuals, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna and the wise men, are indicative of what later Jesus says in Matthew 13 about how the kingdom of God is discovered. Some discover the kingdom of God as a result of a life long search. The merchant who is in search of fine pearls. That to me is descriptive of the wise men. But the kingdom and the Christ child are also found quite by surprise. Like the farmer who discovers treasure in his field. Upon learning that it is there sells all that he has to get it. That's the shepherds. Not intellectual like the wise men. Not in pursuit of a religious quest as the wise men. But when the truth is laid before them they respond.

All of these who respond in worship also do something that is consistent with their life pattern. I'm struck with that in the responses of hostility and indifference and worship, how in each case the people who make the response act consistently.

Then I have to say to myself, O Lord, how am I consistently responding to you?

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His first coming is marked with these responses. But there is a Second Coming of the Lord, which we should think of at this season of the year.

When I use the term second coming in this context it is not the Second Coming when he splits the clouds. We will talk of that shortly. But it is the Second Coming where Christ is born in us. It is the Holy Spirit's task in the birth narrative of the gospel of Luke to indicate that the virgin Mary had conceived in her by the Holy Spirit the Christ child. What the Holy Spirit did on the physical level he seeks to do on the spiritual level in our lives by bringing Christ into us and by causing him to be born in us.

In the first coming, Christ comes into the world and he comes into human experience. He becomes a man. But in his Second Coming when he comes into our hearts he comes born inside. He comes into us personally. Not just that he's in the world but he is in us.

As he comes in us and is born in us then he begins to grow and to develop. Even as in his physical life the Christ grew and increased. So in the spiritual dimension, Christ seeks to grow in us.

I shall never forget a sermon I heard about 5 years ago by a retired episcopal minister in Springfield. He was in his early 90s and was a man who dearly loved the Lord. One time in a chapel session at Christmas he took as his text the theme, "the baby grew up." He talked about how easy it is at Christmas time for us to approach the Christ child. There is such a simplicity to the story of the wise men and the shepherds and the coming of our Lord. But as Christ grows he does the unexpected. He does not become easily defined and he goes in directions that are his own choosing rather than ours. How difficult it was indeed for his parents to cope with him and understand him as he began to grow. As the child grew up the simplicity of his nature began to be replaced by the complexity so that his parents don't understand why it is. So that at the age of 12 he wants to be in the temple. His mother in Mark 3 cannot understand why it is that he is going to Galilee preaching and saying that he has power to forgive sins. She wants to come and to take him home. And his disciples later don't understand what compels him to go to the cross.

From the babe of the manger he has become the complex Lord of human destiny and of earth. I think of how often this same Christ child in a spiritual way works in us that when we first receive him into our lives and are born again it is so simple, it is so wonderful. It is just what it ought to be. But as the Christ child grows in us sometimes he begins doing things and going places we do not understand. He begins leading us in direction where we would have him called back and say, "Lord, not that way; here's the way – go here."

As I live longer and another Christmas has gone by and I am a year older this year I'm learning more I don't know more but I think I'm learning more. As I minister more in this congregation and I'm beginning by the way to see the value of years that I feel that maybe after being among you for a while I know you better and that you trust me more. But I have noticed that indeed the Christ child always seeks to in addition to being born in us seeks to grow in us and we have often problems in this area.

I think that many times we're in the position of the innkeeper whose rooms are full but who does have a place for Christ if he desires to be born there. So we allow him to be born in a certain room. If for a moment we would think of our lives as a house consisting of many rooms I have

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thought, what rooms in my life have I allowed Christ to enter. What rooms in my own life have I been saying to him, Lord there is no room for you?

I've been learning something over this Christmas vacation. Early Tuesday morning my wife left for Alabama for a deserved Christmas vacation. She has desperately wanted to be in Alabama for some time. We thought this time would be a good time to do it. I could get along with the loneliness by the many people who had been so friendly. And also I buried myself in work so I could somehow get by.

But we had a group over to the house on Friday night, the deacons and the pastoral staff. It was very interesting what I did. I think I learned this trick from my wife. She'd really shoot me if she knew I were saying this. There were certain doors that I closed. My guests were permitted the freedom of the front part of the house.

I think of the scripture that the Lord speaks, "Behold I stand at the door and knock." What we do in the new birth is we say, Lord come into my house and when we invite him he does come in. He may come into the hall. He may even come into the living room. He's in the house. If we were to die, we have been born again, we'd spend eternity with him. No question about that. He has come into our life.

But there are yet perhaps other areas where the doors are closed and what is needed is what I might call deeper layers of conversion. Deeper layers of being born again. Deeper layers and rooms within our life in which the Christ needs to enter.

I think some of these may include our thought life, our sex life, our relationship to family, our friends, our will, sometimes our stubbornness, our opinions, our fears. It is so possible for these rooms in our life to get so untidy that we close the door surely not wanting the Lord to come in and look at *that* room.

But you know why the Lord wants to come into that room? He doesn't want to come in to inspect it. He knows what's in the room without having to open the door. He can see through the door. He knows what's in the room. The reason why he wants to come into the room is to help us clean it up. And he'll give us a hand if we'll open the door.

The child grew. I pray that in all of our lives we would continue to experience that growth which is Christ of ever opening the avenues of our life, the cubbyholes of our life, to his presence. Not only can we say when the child comes he comes in new birth. But we see that new birth as a continual process that is ever going on as we are open and receptive to him.

There is another coming of Christ, a third coming of Christ. It is a coming of the Lord when he meets us in death. In his first two comings, the coming of the Christ into this world and in the coming of Christ into our hearts, it is Christ who comes into our dimension. But in his third coming it is we who enter into his dimension.

In the first two he crosses into our world. And in the last two, we cross into his world. He meets us in death.

Always we must remember as creatures of time that we are even at a Christmas season that there comes a moment when no longer do we look simply at work. But we also look at death.

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Simeon has that concept when he holds the Christchild in his arms and he says “A sword shall pierce through your own soul also that thoughts of many hearts might be revealed.” Simeon sees in the moment that he holds the Christ child that death is also a specter to be dealt with.

So when we look at the blessing of Christmas we need to recognize that it’s true intent is not simply to place Christ into the world and more to place Christ into our hearts. But it’s further fulfilled in allowing us to be placed in his world and his dimension.

The first death of a Christian in the New Testament is found in Acts 7. I’m excluding for a moment without discussion on it the death of Ananias and Sapphira and Judas. But the first death of a Christian is found in Acts 7 with Stephen. Stephen has faced the counsel and he is not experiencing the rage in the eyes of the men who are surrounding him. So intense is the rage that Luke uses the term that they gnashed their teeth at him. Stephen looks somehow beyond the immediate things in that room, beyond the faces in that room. All of a sudden the realm of another dimension, opens to him. And he’s full of the Spirit, Luke says, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God. And Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He saw that when he went from his world into God’s word that Jesus was there coming to meet him.

I love that phrase “He saw the Lord standing.” I may be making too much of a verb here for a moment but it does strike me that in the narrative of Christ’s ascension it notes that when the Lord ascended into heaven he sat down. But when Stephen sees him as his life is going to be taken from him, he sees the Lord standing. I kind of like to imagine that when the Lord saw Stephen coming he stood up. He stood up to meet him. I have been thinking in respect to life as I have faced difficult situations and just think daily as all of you that life indeed has an extremely short span and is held by a very thin thread.

As I told Jewel good bye this last week and with the kids I recognized that a life does hang by a thread. One does never know when the moment might be when the Lord does come for us in death. That’s equally true of a short trip as well as a long trip. I’m struck by what one Christian write, author John Gosset has said about this coming of Christ in death where he notes. “When we are young heaven is a vague and nebulous and shadowy place. But as our friends gather there more and more it gains body and vividness and hominess. And when our dearest have past yonder, how real and evident it grows. How near it is. How often we steal yonder. For as the master put it, where our treasure is there will our heart be also. Never again will I give out that stupid line, here is a happy land far, far away. It is not far. They are quite near. And the communion of the saints is a tremendous and most blessed fact.”

Christ meets us in death. Do you realize that in these three comings – his coming into the world as a baby, his coming into our hearts, his coming to meet us in death. That all of these are areas of his coming that are received totally by faith. The Christ child lying in the manger stall in Bethlehem can in no stretch of the imagination from a worldly point of view be reckoned as a king. One receives it and acts upon it in faith. What the angels and the prophets have spoken has indeed come to pass. You cannot see when Jesus Christ personally comes into your life. You cannot see it. It is as the wind. You do not know from where he comes or where he goes. It cannot be seen. It’s received through faith. When we slip from this life into the next life through death one cannot see from the physical level Christ coming to meet us. But he’s there. And what a tremendous perspective that Stephen has. How in that moment of his dying he looks, not at the external situation, not at the persons who are in the room. But he looks directly into the face of Christ. And he sees into the dimension of his spirit. Christ meets us in death.

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For Christians, while death is painful it is nevertheless the very completion of our hope. That we who hope in Christ shall never die in vain. As Paul has said, To be absent from the body is to be present with Christ.

The fourth coming of our Lord is when he physically and personally comes again. He will be seen by all the world and recognized as sovereign and king. This coming which we know as the second coming but which for the sake of this sermon I am calling the fourth coming is witnessed to by the angel when after the Lord's being taken up into heaven, the angel tells the disciples, "This Jesus who was taken from you into heaven will come in the same way that you saw him go." I think that what we need to get used to at Christmas time that whether it is this life or the life to come Christmas is going to be celebrated forever. I cannot think of going through Christmas without singing a carol. I cannot think of going through Christmas with out somehow remembering the advent of our Lord. Or of giving or receiving gifts. I sort of suspect that some of the carols that we sing on earth are going to wind their way into the worship of heaven. And that eternity is going to be one continuous celebration of all aspects related to the Lord's work and that when his second coming occurs he will make it possible for us then to enter his dimension for ever where there will always be Christmas. Get used to Christmas. It's going to be around for eternity.

I further thought in respect to the Second Coming of this fact this week that my wife and children will not be physically present for Christmas. This will be the first Christmas we're separated. I don't want a whole lot of sympathy at this point although I appreciate it. But this was an intelligent rational decision that we made. It was fully agreed upon. I've got myself occupied and friends have been so gracious and all that. I've got a place to go Christmas I can't believe how kind the people are the minute they heard. They say "Pastor come on over to our house for Christmas." I wish I could accept every invitation but I'm going to go to my sister's.

But they will not be physically present with me for Christmas. They will be present in my heart and mind. I'll probably receive a letter from my wife this Tuesday – I'd better! I'll probably call her on Tuesday night or Wednesday.

But even with those communications and even though she is in my heart and mind there is nothing better than her being person ally present. I think that this somehow describes the current relationship we have with the Lord.

If we have contact now with the Lord by what is called the means of grace through worship, through singing, through communion, through preaching, through the word. We have contact with the Lord. But while he is in us we have never yet seen him. We have not established the physical level of relationship where every eye shall see and every knee shall bow. Thus we are in this Christmas season the Lord is with us and yet in another dimension he is not present as one day he shall be. We are between the times. At this Christmas time we recognize the greatest thing that could happen for us at Christmas or at any time would be for the Lord to come and to complete the relationship which we have had with him by faith all of these years. Or however long it may be for you.

We must work hard at never overcoming the wonder of Christmas or the wonder of expecting the coming of our Lord.

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I think of Christmas Eve as a kid. As a child you get so excited as those Christmas gifts are under the tree and Santa Claus is coming or whoever does come in your house. And the kids if they open their gifts in the morning how restless they are that night expecting something great to happen. Christmas is a wonder.

As you grow older you begin to realize that sometimes your wonder tends to diminish a little bit. Particularly when you know how much it costs for what's laying under that tree. Jesus says be like little children. Be like little children.

There is somehow this which happens in the Christian life that when we are born again in the Lord, when we are children in the Lord, everything is new and wonderful and every doctrine of the church is glorious and a living experience. But when we become older it's so easy for what we have believed to simply be a doctrine rather than an expectancy it becomes a creed, it becomes dogma rather than reality. And what a tremendous thing at Christmas to see the Lord revive in our hearts the wonder of a child which says even so come Lord Jesus. Those who eagerly wait for you, who long for your coming, he will appear a second time. There is a wonder in what Christ does in all of his comings. A wonder when he comes into the world a wonder when he comes into our hearts, a wonder when he meets us in death, a wonder when he comes again. How blessed to belong to him at Christmas or any time in the year.

What can we say, Lord. Except thanks. Even that word, Lord, we wish could be extended to all kinds of words which would go down past the layer of language into the inner depths of our being where we call out to there in the secret place. And express our profound feeling toward you and towards Christmas. While we're thanking thee for thy appearance within history we praise thee for thy appearance within our lives. Especially, Lord, I would pray today that all of the rooms of our lives would have an open door to you. That never would a "No room" sign be posted over any experience or any feeling or any relationship. Or any sin. But that, Lord, we would invite you to come and to possess and fill our home, our house completely with thine own presence. Help us, Lord, to know how to get a hold of this. That indeed if we've been keeping you out of room then, Lord, maybe just simply from our heart in this moment all that you're looking for is a recognition. Here, Lord. My family's open to you. Here, Lord, my marriage is open to you. Here, Lord, my sins are open to you. Here, Lord are my fears. There's room in this room for you. As well, Lord, we just give you thanks in this moment for the great realities that Christmas brings to us the certainty of your physical presence once upon earth. But more than that, the certainty of your presence that gives to us eternal life, that promises a hope which can never fade or dim. But grows more brightly search year goes by. A hope in you. A hope not rooted in time. not rooted in persons. But a hope rooted and fixed in you. You who have come, whom we love and adore. We praise you and we give thanks. Now and forever. Amen. And Amen.