

**"Awaiting Christ's Return: Attitude and Action"**  
**Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday of Kingdomtide**  
**Lectionary Year B**  
**November 8, 2009**  
**Text: Hebrews 9:24-28**  
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What do you look forward to with eager anticipation? Fridays? Payday? Sundays? Birthday? Graduation? Christmas? An empty nest? Summer vacation? Retirement? The next *Twilight* movie? Not many of us would list the second coming of Christ as one of the things we are waiting for eagerly. That's something we may look forward to about as much as a root canal or an audit by the IRS.

One of the reasons for this may have to do with our close association of the second coming with judgment. In certain quarters of the church today, you can hear plenty of talk that would make you believe that when Jesus returns, he is bringing a big can of "whoop ass" with him. When it comes to scripture, there's at least some justification for that line of thinking.

For instance, Matthew 25:31-46 paints the scene of Jesus' coming again in all his glory to judge the nations, separating the sheep from the goats, as it were, on the basis of how they have treated the poor and the marginalized. Those who have been compassionate wind up being known and accepted by Jesus, while those who cast a blind eye

and a deaf ear to the needy get the same in return from the Lord. That's more than a little disconcerting.

But the writer of Hebrews has a completely different take on the matter. He is comparing Jesus' role as high priest with the traditional Jewish one. We saw this earlier as we looked at previous passages in this New Testament letter. The high priest enters the sanctuary made by human hands; Jesus enters into the very presence of God in heaven. The Jewish high priest made a sacrifice not of his own blood but that of an animal instead; Jesus' sacrifice was of his own blood. The high priest had to make the sacrifice annually; Jesus' sacrifice is once and for all.

And that is the main point for the writer of Hebrews. *Jesus paid the price for sin once and for all.* He permanently removed sin by the sacrifice of himself. Sin has been dealt with completely. It no longer stands in the way of our relationship with God. And the writer of Hebrews emphasizes this fact by saying that Jesus "has appeared once for all at the end of the age." In other words, Jesus' incarnation, his becoming human, ushered in the new age. And in this age to come, there will be no more sin. It has been, like in the movie, paid forward. Jesus' atoning death is sufficient to cover the debt of sin we owe from now on, forever and ever, Amen.

So when Jesus comes again, according to Hebrews, he will not have to deal with the issue of sin, because he already has dealt with it. He's been there and done that. That's old business. That's past tense. That's ancient history. That's water under the bridge. Those are bygones that we need to let be bygones.

So what does Jesus come to do when he returns? What does the writer of Hebrews say? He says that "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." What Jesus comes to do when he returns is to save. *He comes to save.* So our attitude as we await his coming is appropriately that of eager anticipation. We can and should *eagerly* await his return.

While eagerness, then, should be our attitude as we await the second coming of Christ, what should be our action? *What should we be doing while we eagerly await Jesus' return?* As it turns out, there are some dos and don'ts we are to follow that are set out in what actually are two of our lectionary passages for next Sunday, Hebrews 10:23-25 and Mark 13:1-8. The don'ts are described in the passage from Mark. Let's look at them to begin with.

First Don't: **Don't be overly impressed by and dependent on worldly institutions.** Nothing of this world is permanent. Only God can be counted on always. At one point in the book *The Shack*, Jesus says

to Mack, the central character, "I don't create institutions: that's an occupation for those who want to play God." He goes on to suggest that the institutions of religion, politics, and economics are only "tools that many people use to prop up their illusions of security and control . . . a vain effort to create some sense of certainty and security where there isn't any." As Jesus instructs Mack about these institutions, "It's all false. Systems cannot provide you security, only I can" [pp. 179-80].

In Mark 13:2, Jesus asks his disciples to look at the great stones of the large buildings that make up the Temple complex in Jerusalem, the institution at the heart and center of Jewish religious life in Jesus' day. Then he tells them that it will all come tumbling down, which it in fact did. As we await Jesus' return, we cannot put our ultimate trust in the permanence of any of the institutions of our own making.

Second Don't: **Don't be led astray.** As we wait eagerly for Jesus to come back, we must develop a strong sense of discernment with respect to the gospel. We need to listen carefully and think clearly. There are lots of gospels floating around that are far too easy to buy into: a gospel of prosperity that sees faith in Christ as a means to accumulate wealth; a crossless gospel, a Christianity without tears; a nationalistic gospel that weds faith and patriotism; a gospel of self-

help that sees spiritual practices simply as a means of personal enhancement [Brueggemann, p. 594].

In Mark 13:6, Jesus warns his disciples, "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." It's not always easy to discern the authentic gospel from its many counterfeits, but we must be diligent to do so as we wait eagerly for Jesus' return.

Third Don't: **Don't be alarmed by pain and suffering.** It happens. In Mark 13:7 Jesus instructs his followers, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come." The world is a sinful place. Nations war with one another. Justice is present some of the time and totally absent at other times. The environment can be terribly cruel. Disease and major illness can strike without rhyme or reason with absolutely no regard for age or station in life. Life is precarious in our world, and pain and suffering are guaranteed to come our way at some point in time. We must expect it and not be alarmed by it.

These are the things we are not to do, the don'ts as it were, while we eagerly await Jesus' second coming. What about the dos? In Hebrews 10:23-25, we have them spelled out for us. First Do: **Hold onto hope with an assured and constant faith.** In 10:23, the writer of Hebrews recommends, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he [God] who has promised is faithful."

Why is our hope to be unwavering? Because *God is faithful*. As we await the return of his Son, we are to focus on God's assurance of our forgiveness.

Second Do: **We are to engage lovingly in good works.** "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, . . ." is what the writer of Hebrews suggests in 10:24. *Good works are always an extension of genuine love.* Whenever things seem to be particularly bad, we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare, "All is lost!" In those times, doing good can be quite a challenge. It is not our natural inclination to do for others when we are concerned about our own wants and needs. We have trouble motivating ourselves individually, so we must "provoke" one another, gently prodding each other to look beyond our own circumstances and be aware of the needs of others all around us. Such self-giving generosity of spirit is a major "do" as we eagerly await Jesus' return.

Third Do: **We are to meet together as a means of encouragement.** The writer of Hebrews, in 10:25, instructs that we are not to neglect meeting together, for, as he suggests, it is all the more important to encourage one another as we see the day of Christ's return approaching. You have heard me say it before, and you will hear me say it time and time again, John Wesley insisted that there is no such thing as an individual Christian. *We need each other.* We need to

be in community. The Christian life is a group effort, not a solo experience. And the main thing, the most important thing, we can do for each other is to be encouraging.

In three short weeks we will be entering the season of Advent. As you know, Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year, and it is the season of preparation for Christmas. It is a time when we purposefully and intentionally prepare our hearts and minds to receive the Christ Child afresh and anew. It is something we don't have any trouble at all anticipating with eagerness. Who doesn't look forward to Christmas?

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we stand in between his two comings: his incarnation and his coming again. No matter what we have heard about his second coming, we are to remember that *the One who comes a second time is the same One who came the first time*. It's the same Jesus, and he comes both times with the same purpose: to save us. Jesus comes to save—as a baby lying in a manger and as the king of heaven returning in glory—Jesus comes to save.

And for that reason our attitude should be one of eager anticipation, and our action should be to not be overly impressed by and dependent on worldly institutions, to not be led astray, and to not be alarmed by pain and suffering. Instead, we should hold onto hope with an assured and constant faith, engage lovingly in good works, and meet

together as a church family to encourage one another. This is how we, as disciples of Christ, are to await his return.