

COMING AND GOING  
(The Blunders and The Wonders)

*“Ye do proclaim the Lord’s death until he come again.”*  
(I Corinthians 11:46)

Does it ever seem to you like I am only one tiny voice in a vast sea of Christian tradition and custom that is saying and teaching something quite different? That is not really true, of course. I have come to none of my own convictions and beliefs unaided. Abraham broke from the traditional understandings of Ur in Babylon, or there never would have been a Judaism. Jesus reworked so much of Judaism, and in such a new light, that it caused the emergence of Christianity. Paul believed and taught differently from the Mother Church in Jerusalem, or Christianity would never have reached the Gentiles. Luther, in more fear and trembling than most people realize, broke from the enormous authority of the Catholic church and the Pope, though Luther was at the time both priest and monk. I come from a long line of “reformers and seekers” who have wanted to understand more clearly and deeply the thing going on between God and us children – us earthlings – we humans who are obviously in so much trouble and confusion in this earthly realm. All of *you* come from this same long line of reformers and seekers. You do remember that, don’t you? Because sometimes it seems like a few of you resent having to think – and even resent it if *I* think. Others, of course, swallow every new notion that comes down the road, with even less thought than the traditionalists among you who hang on tight to what you already knew twenty-five years ago. That makes me appreciate the traditionalists – at least they hang on to *something*.

In any case, I am far from a lone voice. Sometimes around here it feels like I preach and teach and show you wondrous things – and you even give me the impression that you have heard them and that you are convinced. But three days later, I turn around and everything is right back where it was before – the same old blunders hiding all the Wonders, just like they have been doing for years. Instead of moving on to incorporate new understanding and to see new dimensions in the way we do things and in the faith we share together, it reverts back to the same old fear, guilt, and knee-jerk reactions to the seasons and challenges and opportunities that come to us. Or maybe some of you just have a higher tolerance for boredom than I do. But I think it is insulting to portray the Son

of God as a country bumpkin with an IQ under 64 who couldn't put two coherent sentences together to save His life. "Me Jesus. You saved."

I am not trying to be impatient. People grow when they are willing to. But sometimes I cannot help wondering how much longer I get to have with you. If then you remind me (advertently or inadvertently) that you have not heard very much of what I have tried to teach you yet, I just naturally feel like I need to say it more clearly. Some of you are never going to hear me. I know that. It's okay. You are just sitting it out, waiting for another. Hopefully God will send somebody into your life you can hear. But the rest of you seem to be trying. Sometimes you are very trying. So I will go on trying too.

The theme of the Advent sermons this year is "The Blunders and The Wonders." Mostly what I tell you has been taught in seminaries across the land since before I was born. I will be telling you things I thought I already taught you, though some of you keep talking and acting like you have never heard any of it ever before. I am no "liberal scholar" – liberal scholars teach people how to doubt. Many of them believe very little themselves. Many of them do not have much quality or consistent experience in a real church – a true faith family. Christians doubt in order to believe more strongly – in order to sift out the dust and debris that keep contact with the Holy Spirit vague and diluted. I am not a liberal scholar; I am a minister. I only talk about the blunders so we can clear them out of the way and get to the Wonders. I suppose you cannot help but worry, at times – if you are listening – that I will take away things you have tried to believe and then leave you with nothing. Does the fact that it is really hard to believe most of the blunders in the first place make you desperate to hang on to them even tighter? Is that it? You think that if they go, surely nothing will be left. On top of that, many of us have been conditioned not to question our beliefs, and have even been threatened with hellfire if we did. Who wants to *think*, if it brings on God's anger and the church's rejection? So then it's my job to tell you what they told me to tell you, and it's your job to believe it without asking any questions or causing any trouble. Is that life in the Christian church? I hate to tell you how often it is.

So a high percentage of religious people have been conditioned not to challenge their beliefs – by people who are afraid it will all blow away unless they make it "against the rules" to think or doubt or question. And I keep asking you: "Do you really think the Omniscient, Omnipotent, Almighty God is afraid of your tiny little questions? If so, you need to

get a new God! What good is a God who is even more immature and threatened than you are? Life is hard. If you cannot find a God you really trust, you are much better off without one. And by the way, faith is not about what you believe – it is about who you trust. (But that’s a different sermon.)

Maybe you think it’s a modern world, but most of the children being raised in Christian churches today all over the world will never be taught the truth. They will be raised to accept the traditional explanations, with incentives of fear and rejection surrounding the precepts in order to prevent them from questioning. And for that reason, even if they stay connected to the church, a high percentage of them will end up taking the teachings and stories with a grain of salt, pretending to believe them on the outside, while burying them in some inner dungeon called “faith” on the inside, though it is really only superstition. And it will all be relegated to a later time – an afterlife – that has little to do with life in the real world, here and now. All over the world, Christians are called hypocrites. It comes from trying to hold a whole lot of beliefs and opinions that have nothing to do with what we really think or how we live or behave or conduct our lives. If you believe something that makes no difference to how you live, what difference does it make? I know ... I just lost some of you.

In any case, Christianity is being taught that way. You are supposed to believe a whole lot of things which you do not understand and which have no relevance to how you live, and if you successfully suspend doubts and questions and just “BELIEVE IT” (whatever that means), somehow that will get you into Heaven. So most Christians think poverty is holy, yet they try to get rich. They believe virginity and chastity are holy, yet they prefer to get laid and, God forbid, even married. They believe Christ is coming soon, yet they are laying up treasures on earth as fast as they can – for their own retirement, for their children, for their grandchildren. They believe we should all obey the Ten Commandments, yet cannot name more than two or three of them. Thank God most of you are not stupid enough to pay any attention to what you believe. Mark Twain said, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.” For a high percentage of the Christian world, that is uncomfortably accurate. And the only way to keep it from becoming obvious is to smear it all over with hellfire. The Loving God is gonna getcha! And they think the *Harry Potter* books are evil? Teach all the children to be afraid of a really fun story – in the name of the Loving Savior – but the *Left Behind* books are okay? And you think my mother should have washed *my* mouth out with soap?

The problem is not that there is no Christmas. Jesus really came. Incarnation – God with us. The problem is that our present-day celebrations obscure and hide the LIGHT: reduce it to glitter and magic that entertain but do not call us to give our lives to a new purpose and a new Kingdom that require all from us, and all of our living. If we do not repent of our mistakes, the mistakes take over our lives. So the theme this Advent is “The Blunders and The Wonders.” When I speak of the blunders, some of you will feel like I am taking Christmas away. But the blunders hide and obscure the Wonders, and if you hang in for the full message, you will get more Christmas than you ever have before.

It is important to know and remember that the blunders of Christendom all developed in understandable ways. Nobody was trying to make mistakes on purpose. Nobody was trying to mislead us or do damage on purpose. But the blunders obscure the Wonder of the Incarnation and put shields up between us and our Lord. Why we hang on to the blunders generation after generation may not be quite as innocent. The Light is awfully bright, and the urge to put distance between ourselves and Christ is sometimes nearly overwhelming. Nevertheless, the blunders filter the Light and cut the power and impact of the Wonder of Christmas, sometimes beyond recognition. So I want to talk about the blunders and the Wonders this Advent. I will have little time for Rudolph or wise men or twinkle, twinkle little star. And some of you may decide to go someplace where they don't know, and don't want to know, any better. But that is what's wonderful about the Reformation: we all have lots of choices.

So here we go. Some of you have wondered what it would be like to have been a Jewish Christian in that first generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus. All your life you would have been raised to think and believe one way – in circumcision, dietary laws, and keeping the Sabbath – and to believe that if you and all your fellow Jews could get it right and keep it right, then God would come save you and set everything right. Now suddenly you have this incredible but very scary new faith: Jesus is the true Messiah, though He is doing it all in ways nobody had ever imagined. And you are going to be saved because God loves you, not because you get it all right or do everything correctly. And though you couldn't believe it at first, after the death and resurrection you began to realize that Jesus has more authority than even Moses – which is inconceivable, but nevertheless. So that is what you are believing more and more each day, especially as you encounter the Holy Spirit of the Living Christ as you continue on in this new faith.

At first you try to keep it all together – the old and the new – but as Jesus warned: “You cannot put new wine into old wine skins.” So eventually you have to decide whether to stay Jewish or go Christian. Can you imagine the heartache, the travail, the chaos in families as some decided one way, and some another? And what if you were wrong? What if you trusted the authority of Jesus to save you, and Moses was right after all – and God will reject you for breaking the laws you have believed in all your life? After all, you have been told and taught to obey them, and warned about what will happen if you do not. Very, very scary!

Some of you are already able to identify with what it must have been like for the early Jewish Christians to “leave” their Jewish ways to follow Jesus. It is hard to break from the familiar and traditional, but Jesus has often required it, one way or another. He requires it still. Some of you caught on years ago that I am inviting you to be at odds with most of the traditional Christian world. They have it wrong. They are obscuring the real Message. A huge number of people in our world today think there are only two choices: accept the traditional Christian frameworks, or leave the church and Christendom. Thousands leave, and not because they are all evil or stupid (at least no more so than the rest of us). They leave because they cannot swallow Christianity as it is being presented, and they do not know there is an alternative. Yet there is, and I tell you about it all the time. Only, most of you let me tell you, but then you just let it end there.

I cannot carry this Message all by myself – never could. Now I am getting old and tired. So more and more, I am asking: Are you going to help carry the Message, or are you going to just let it melt back into the sand so nobody will know there is a different Christendom – a different kind of church – than the kind they see and hear about all around them? “But,” you say, “if I speak up, I might get into arguments. People might reject or dislike me.” No kidding, Sherlock! Peter, Paul, Origen, Augustine, Luther, John Cotton – and yes, of course, Jesus – would be so incredibly upset to hear that! And they would pat you on the head and say, “Oh, please forgive me. I’m so sorry I mentioned it. I would never dream of asking you to get into any trouble.”

Clearly, quietly, but insistently, I need to tell you that the Second Coming (as most people speak of it) is a blunder: a mistake, a wrongness, an untruth. I bring this up again today, the First Sunday of Advent, because Christmas is about “The Coming.” We don’t have to be coy, or pretend we don’t know the rest of the story, or act like we’ve never heard

it before. Christmas is The Coming. Incarnation: God comes in human flesh to be with us ... to communicate with us ... to encounter us ... to save us. There is mystery all around that – how much God can be contained in human form? Though we are permitted, even encouraged, to doubt and ask questions, our minds are finite and too small to understand all wisdom and truth. But we get part of it – more than we can handle – and plenty to keep us grateful and responsive for the rest of our lives here. Whatever the titles and however you describe your Christology, this Incredible Messenger/Messiah lived among us and taught, healed, and caused mayhem in a beautiful/terrible Way beyond anything we had ever seen before. And He died at our hands, and rose again, and now guides, comforts, and encourages any of us who will allow it and be open to it. Christmas is about *that*. Trying to reduce it down to the birth of a baby we know nothing about is to avoid it – to shield from it. A lot of Christmas in our culture is trying to celebrate the Message without having anything to do with the Message or the Messenger. If one thing is obvious and certain about Jesus, it is that nobody gets close to Him without either hating Him or loving Him – without either rejecting Him or having their lives changed by Him. And I don't mean nicked – I mean transformed.

Christmas, at its core, is THE COMING. *That* is the Wonder: His coming to be with us. What possible blunder could we make to obscure The Coming? Is there anything in the world we could do, say, or believe that would negate The Coming – that would distance us from it, obscure it, weaken it, allow us to go back to our old ways as if this Wonder had never happened?

Yes, there is one thing that could bury it all under rubbish so thick it would be as if it never happened. And it is called “The Second Coming.” Christmas is The Coming, but never mind any of that; now we are waiting for Him to COME AGAIN. Yes, He came, but we rejected Him – killed Him; it didn't take; nothing significant happened. So now we are waiting for Him to come again – to do it right; to do it *our way*; to smash and destroy everybody who doesn't “accept and believe in Him.” Never mind the Resurrection. Never mind the gift of the Holy Spirit. Never mind living the LIFE here and now. Never mind all the endless dimensions and relationships all around us that are a training ground for all that is to come. Wait for a “Second Coming” – wait for Heaven; hope for the Rapture. What a travesty! When did Jesus ever promise His disciples that He would take them out of the challenge – that He would help us

to escape from the ordeal of FOLLOWING HIM? What scriptural and theological trash!

The refusal to let go of the Second Coming is a refusal to let Jesus be the Messiah He is instead of the Messiah we expected. John's Gospel had already figured this out. So had much of the rest of Christendom by the end of the first century. But now, in our own time, vast segments of Christendom spend enormous time and energy on the blunder of the Second Coming, when they should be spending it on the Wonder of the presence of the Holy Spirit – in their prayers; in all they are facing and doing; in all they are trying to accomplish on a daily basis in the here and now, both individually and together with other Christians.

Not that Heaven is a blunder. Heavens no! Heaven awaits us, far greater and bigger and full of more wonder than any of us know. Only, Jesus is not coming here again in any way He has not already come. *We are going there!* And not in some far future “Day of Judgment” that will take place on some picayune little reworked earth. The moment you die here, you are going there: *“This day you will be with me in paradise.”* (Luke 23:43) *“In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”* (John 14:2-3) But not in some horrid “Last Days” physical scenario. In “Spirit calling unto spirit,” one-on-one, the moment you are out of here. Because He really loves you, He will “come again” – pick you up from wherever you are, at whatever level of development, and take you from there. What WONDER is His love ... and how we love to obscure it, make it scary, put it in some far-off future so we can go on doing things our own way in the present.

Waiting and waiting and waiting for Messiah to come, and then waiting for Him to come again – while the Messiah sits closer than the air we breathe, waiting on us to be willing to open our lives to Him, to spend time with Him, to plan and dream and think and act in partnership with Him. We wait for Him – He waits for us. Guess who is happy about this blunder? Satan! (And Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins, who have made millions off of it.)

So where did this blunder come from? No time for full details, but essentially it was a mindset already in place before Jesus came to us. It is called “Jewish apocalyptic thinking.” Amidst the great discouragement from being defeated, enslaved, and controlled over and over again

(by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, the Greeks, and the Romans), the Jewish people wondered more and more what had become of the plans and promises of God. Was there really a God? Were they really the Chosen People in special Covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The prophets kept telling them that all the trouble was because they did not keep the Covenant. But that explanation started wearing thin after a thousand years or so of mayhem. Those trying to keep faithful started hoping and dreaming more and more of a New Age to come, and of a special LEADER – a descendant of David, a Messiah (an anointed one, to fulfill the promise of a king in David’s line) – who would come and right all the wrongs, set everything right, and fulfill the promises of the destiny and heritage of the Jewish people. Surely God would not abandon them forever. This New Age – the Great DAY OF THE LORD, the Apocalypse – would justify all the years of discouragement and sorrow and dying and defeat.

This was the mindset of much of the faithful Judaism that Jesus was born into. And as happens, even to great leaders, Jesus was unable to break through all the prejudices, opinions, and expectations of His time. The followers made incredible changes, but they still heard some things through their old ways of thinking. They especially confused Jesus’ sayings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem with their own hopes for the Apocalypse. And much of Jesus’ vast picture of the glory and endless dimensions of the heavenly Kingdom, we reduce to the tiny expectations of a flat-earth cosmology, even today. I still get asked, on occasion, if cremation is unchristian. God won’t be able to manage resurrecting you if your soulless body is reduced to ashes and scattered? What a pathetic and helpless little god we sometimes try to worship.

We are beginning Advent with communion. What is the connection between Christmas and communion? Both are The Coming. Jesus comes to us. And the relationship we have with the Holy Spirit is what we celebrate in communion. Communion reminds us of the *real* Second Coming – God’s presence with us on a daily basis. That is the *real* WONDER. To say it too quickly and lightly: Jesus lived, taught, healed, called His followers, challenged the religious institutions of His time, and then died – all to reveal the true nature and purposes and promises of God toward us. And one of His biggest promises was that He would come again. There is no getting around it. That is what it was all leading up to. *He would come again!* He was with us so short a time and we need Him so much! But it would be okay – He would come again.

Can you not feel the blunder? Can you not hear your own soul screaming at the tragedy and pathos of the blunder? *He DID come again!* He has been here ever since. Only, He did not abandon us for two thousand years, as most of Christendom teaches. Humans are not that good with abandonment and rejection issues. Is that your notion of a loving God? Does that sound like the loving *Christos* you trust and worship? “Hang in – I’ll be back in two thousand years or so.” No wonder you don’t tithe!

Christianity is missing something big – HUGE! We are supposed to be mobilized, on the move, in the corps – working for the Kingdom all these years – not sitting around, doing our own thing in our own way, waiting for Kingdom Come. He did not abandon us for two thousand years. He left us for thirty-eight hours! Then fifty days later, Pentecost – to make it clear that we are also to be His church and not just isolated individuals. But He came back, as promised – Paraclete, Holy Spirit – tracking each of us wherever we go, through everything that befalls us. Talk about WONDER ... and love ... and true hope ... and peace beyond understanding. Please, if you have not already traded the pathetic little Christmas our world celebrates for the real one, *now* might be a good time.