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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 3, Series B
Saturday, December 12th, 2020
Sunday, December 13th, 2020

Sermon: Jesus Christ Is Coming to Town¹
Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Focus Statement: Jesus Christ will come again on the Last Day.

Function Statement: That by God's grace they would be holy and blameless at his appearing.

Sermon Structure: Text-Application

Doctrinal Locus: "And he will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end" (Nicene Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen! I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but one of the creepiest holiday songs has got to be "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." Just listen to the lyrics:

*You better watch out
You better not cry
Better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town
He's making a list
And checking it twice;
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is coming to town*

*He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness' sake!*

*O! You better watch out!
You better not cry
Better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town*

¹ An earlier version of this sermon was preached on December 14th, 2014, at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado, and appears in my sermon collection, [*Looking for God in All the Wrong Places*](#).

Now we all know the jolly, old elf is supposed to be inspired by the 4th century kindly, Greek bishop, St. Nicholas. But the Santa Claus of this popular song is a scary character. First of all, your favor with him is based entirely on works righteousness with no room for grace. “He knows if you’ve been good or bad.” “He’s making a list/And checking it twice/Gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.” And secondly, Santa Claus seems a lot like your worst nightmare of a stalker ex-girlfriend. “He sees you when you’re sleeping/He knows when you’re awake.” The Santa in this song has more in common with George Orwell’s Big Brother from the *1984 novel* than he does with “jolly, old Saint Nick.”

Now I’m all for teaching kids rules and encouraging polite manners (I spend several weeks in my confirmation class teaching the Ten Commandments). I discipline my children when they do wrong. But after listening to this song, I’d almost be *afraid* to go to bed on Christmas Eve! I much prefer the Santa Claus from the Tom Hanks film, *Polar Express* (2004), or—even better!—the classic, *Miracle on 34th Street* (the 1947 version starring Maureen O’Hara).

Unfortunately, the way I feel about the song, “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” is similar to the way that many people feel about Jesus’ Second Coming on the Last Day.

*You better watch out!
 You better not cry!
 You better not pout.
 I’m telling you why:
 Jesus Christ is coming to town!*

In the Nicene Creed we confess, “And he will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead.” For many of us, that line of the Creed is more likely to make your spine tingle than to give you warm, fuzzy feelings. The foreboding of Christ’s coming on Judgment Day may fill you with dread and terror rather than joy. Perhaps you picture God as a mean, nasty judge—way

worse than the creepy Santa Claus in the aforementioned Christmas song. After all, the Book of Revelation mentions God's books for judgment (Rev. 20:12). Perhaps God also is "making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice." Except, instead of Christmas presents or coal, the nice people get to go to heaven, and the naughty people get raked *over* the coals in hell for eternity.

We are not the first to be afraid that THE END IS NEAR. When Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians, he was writing to a church that was obsessed with the End Times. They had all kinds of worries and fears about Christ's return. Some of them feared judgment day, no doubt because of personal guilt over their sins (cp. 1 Thess. 1:10). Others were preoccupied with questions about the antichrist or, as Paul calls him, "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:3ff). Still more of the Thessalonians feared that Christ's return had already happened, but they had "missed the boat" and been "left behind" (cp. 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 2 Thess. 2:1-2).

And so Paul wrote his letters to the church in Thessalonica in order to comfort them, encourage them, and stir them up to be busy with good works while they waited for the Last Day. He assured them that they had nothing to fear while they waited for Christ's return, because "Jesus... delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10). "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us..." (1 Thess. 5:9-10). Because of Christ's death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven, and we are justified (made right) with God. Christ's return means final salvation for all believers—certainly not something to be feared or dreaded.

In regard to the date and time of Christ's return, Paul reminds his fellow believers that the Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2), and yet when it

does happen, you won't miss it! You don't have to worry about a secret second coming, such as the so-called "Rapture" taught by Millennial Dispensationalists:

"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are live, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

Jesus' coming will take you by surprise, but *when* he comes, "every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7). Christians who try to predict the end of the world with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other would do well to heed Paul's words. As Christ himself declares, "Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36). If not even Jesus knows when he's coming back (at least prior to his glorification), I wouldn't believe any other human being who presumes to know the date either (although many have tried and failed throughout history).

And so in the meantime, as God's forgiven people, what do we do? "How now shall we live?" Paul urges us to lead holy lives, pleasing to God. Good works are always the joyful response to God's grace, flowing out of the hearts of freed and forgiven saints justified by the blood of Jesus. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification.... For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness" (1 Thess. 4:3, 7).

And yet anytime we are urged to be holy, we fall short. For even though we are declared righteous saints by God, we still struggle in this life with our old Adam, our sinful nature that trips us up and causes us to "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Perhaps a call to holiness sounds like just another law we can't keep. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2).

But once again Paul is ready with the Good News:

“Now may the God of peace *himself* sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *He who calls you* is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

Who is the one who sanctifies you? Who makes you holy? Certainly not you or I! Fallen, sinful human beings can no more make ourselves holy than we can fly through the air like Superman (or Santa’s reindeer!). The God of *peace* sanctifies you (v. 23)! That is Paul’s prayer. And the proof is in the figgy pudding: “He who calls you is faithful; *he* will surely do it” (v. 24).

God is the one who justifies (Rom. 8:33). God is also the one who *sanctifies*, or make us holy. That is why, in the Large Catechism, Martin Luther asks why the Holy Spirit is the *Holy* Spirit? His answer: Because *He* makes *us* holy!

And so, my dear Christian friends, you have nothing to fear on Judgment Day if your faith and trust are in Christ and the cross. He “delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10). He sanctifies us (1 Thess. 5:23). And he is coming soon.

The Latin word for Jesus’ coming in verse 23 is *adventus*, from which we get “Advent,” the name of my favorite season of the Church Year. Advent reminds us that no matter how stressful our lives get, and no matter how terrifying the world becomes, Christ will come on the Last Day and set things right. He will raise the dead, gather his Church, judge the faithless, and put an end to Satan’s tyranny. Jesus will set everything to rights—back to the way things were “in the beginning” (Genesis 1:1) before man’s fall into sin. (*Aside:* The year 2020 ain’t got nothing on Jesus!) Even the creation itself will be restored and renewed as God makes new heavens and a new earth joined together forever (Rom. 8:19ff; Rev. 21:1).

Remember: that’s what last week’s Scripture readings were all about: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain” (Isa. 40:4; cf. 2 Pet. 3:13). Everything back to the way it’s supposed to be!

So what if Santa Claus is coming to town?! Even more important is the coming of Christ. Jesus Christ is coming to town. And the only list that he’s checking is to see if your name is in the Lamb’s Book of Life. As Jesus says, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven!” (Luke 10:20). If you have faith in Christ, you can count on it! Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ shall come again. That’s a promise, not a threat, and you have nothing to fear. So together we pray the prayer of Advent, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ☩ the Holy Spirit. Amen.