

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
First Sunday of Advent  
Sunday, December 1, 2024**

**“Love for One Another and for All”  
I Thessalonians 3:9-13**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

The season of Advent orients us to look in two different directions: we look back in celebration at the coming of Christ in humility at Bethlehem, and we look forward in anticipation to the coming of Christ in glory. The season of Advent is about this “pull from both past and future” (Jeter)—and on the First Sunday of Advent, the liturgical focus of the church is always on the future, on that “reality [...] yet to come” (Evans), on that day when Christ will at last be unmistakably “present again” (Wright).

However, there’s a risk that comes with looking forward to the promised day of Christ... Anticipating Christ’s return can sometimes lead Christians into a kind of escapism, an indifference about our world, a fixation on the world to come instead of the one in which we live. It’s one way Christians can become, as the saying goes, “too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good.”

You might think of this like caring for a tree: now if you think that tree is marked for destruction; if you think there’s already that fateful red ‘X’ spraypainted on its trunk; then you probably won’t be very invested in caring for that tree. Why water and prune and fertilize a tree, the thinking goes, if it’s slated to be cut down anyhow?

Yet the Christian doctrine (teaching) about the coming again of Christ—this is fundamentally misunderstood whenever it leads to indifference about the world around us. The promise of the coming again of Christ—this never permits us to turn our backs on our world; it’s the opposite! As I’m going to explore this morning, this promise can only motivate us to turn compassionately *toward* the world.

As we begin Advent, and look with hope toward a reality that we cannot yet see, we’re called to care for this world today. Listen to how St. Paul puts it in our Epistle Lesson, in the First Letter to the Thessalonians: even as Paul looks forward to what he calls “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints,” Paul also invites the church to embrace the practices of love *right now*. “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all,” Paul writes, “just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (v. 13).

There’s no hint of indifference here about the world in the present; to the contrary, the promised return of Christ is precisely what motivates Paul’s invitation to share Christ’s love and compassion—and not only within the church, but more widely: Paul’s call to love each other and all is an invitation to widen the circle of compassion (cf. Hilton). And it’s in this

way—by caring concretely for the world around us—that, Paul says, we will be made ready for the coming nearness of Christ.

See, the challenge that Paul presents us is to live in ways that correspond to the nearness of Christ, that align with Christ's promised presence. There's a bumper sticker that reads: "Jesus is coming. Look busy!" And really, there's some truth to that! Jesus is coming, so let's act in ways that befit the presence of Christ; so let's live in harmony with the love of God revealed in Christ.

And what would that look like? What would it look like to live in ways that fit with the coming of Christ? The promise of Christ's coming again is the promise of restoration: it's Christ's promise to return to mend what is broken, to restore what has been lost, to heal all the hurt in our hurting world... What then does it look like to act in ways that fit with the coming of Christ? Well, it means working—in our small, limited ways—to mend and restore and heal. We are not Christ; we cannot restore everything that is broken in this world; but as we wait for the One who can, we may at least restore one broken place or relationship...

And what unites all this is, quite simply, the love of Christ. As we'll sing in our Recessional Hymn this morning, "Christ on his throne shall rest, from age to age more glorious, all blessing and all-blest: the tide of time shall never his covenant remove; his name shall stand forever—that name to us is Love" (Montgomery).

Ultimately, the promise of Christ's coming again is a testament to God's unwavering love for the world. In fact, the promised coming of Christ is our assurance that God has not abandoned God's own creation. God so loves the world that God will never abandon the world, but promises in the end to restore this world by Christ's love. And knowing that this world is not abandoned, knowing that God's love will triumph in the end: we can share Christ's love cheerfully and confidently and with hope—assured that though we can work only in small (sometimes seemingly insignificant) ways, the future belongs to the One who can accomplish more than "we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20) and who will in the end restore this hurting world.

Think again of that little analogy about caring for a tree... If someone figures it's marked for destruction, bearing that red 'X,' well then there's nothing more worth doing. Yet in our responsibility as Christians for the world in which we live, that's not our situation at all; because of God's promise to restore this world, we cannot treat this world like it's abandoned. Rather, it's like caring for a tree knowing that the One who planted that tree and who loves that tree will return in the end to revive that tree to its fullest growth and glory. We can prune and fertilize and water and tend to that tree with confidence and cheerfulness and hope—knowing that, in the end, it's not entirely up to us, because there is One who will return to restore that tree in ways we cannot imagine. It turns out, the tree is not marked with that red 'X' of destruction, but rather is marked with the cross of redemption.

Now, the doctrine of the coming of Christ will always leave us with many questions and uncertainties. There's much about this doctrine that we cannot understand or know, much that will remain "unrevealed until its season" (Sleeth). However, though the "how" and "when" of

this doctrine are not something we can know, the “who” and the “why” are crystal clear: “who?” Christ; “why?” love. Christ will come near out of love for the world. As I said before, Advent orients us to Christ in the past and Christ in the future—and it’s always important to remember that the coming of Christ will bring the nearness of the same One we first welcomed at Bethlehem.

So there’s much about this that we cannot know; yet, as one writer puts it: “What we *do* know is that [...] we have [...] experience[d] [Christ’s] holiness and abounding love [...], giv[ing] us a sneak preview of the days to come. [...] God is preparing a future of justice, freedom, reconciliation and wholeness. As we wait and prepare for those days, [...] we are invited to think with anticipation, pray with confidence, and work with commitment [toward] that future” (Morris). Now this leaves us with work to do—with those small, concrete, practical tasks that share the love of Christ. And as we work to restore some small part of God’s creation, we may do so knowing that—in the end—Christ’s reign of love will restore everything that we cannot. Thanks be to God. Amen.