



The Trinity Pulpit



The Coming Christ Revelation 1:4-8

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In J.I. Packer's book *Praying* he maintains that before we can begin to pray properly, we need a proper theological understanding of the God to whom we are praying. Packer tells the story of the danger of imagining God as we might like to without any Biblical understanding of God. One couple told their child that she should imagine God as she would like as she was growing up. The little girl grew up praying and finally admitted in a time of crisis that she had imagined God to be a large pudding and, to be honest, a large pudding did not offer much hope or power in her time of crisis as a young woman. Packer suggests that we need a Biblical understanding of God so we might pray in a fashion where we have the proper expectations of God and our relationship with God.¹

A few years ago the funny yet irreverent movie *Talladega Nights* featured Will Farrell as the fast driving, somewhat intellectually challenged race car driver named Ricky Bobby. There is a scene in this movie that became one of those conversations that has transcended the movie itself. Ricky Bobby has sat down at dinner with his beautiful wife, spoiled kids, and his driving partner. The time has come to say grace for the food and Ricky Bobby begins his prayer with Dear Little Baby Jesus. He is interrupted and told that it is not right to pray this way. What occurs for the next several moments is an irreverent discussion about how each person at the table likes to imagine Jesus. Ricky Bobby wants to imagine Jesus as a baby. He likes that Jesus better. Others like to imagine Jesus in their own way and sometimes in their own invention.

While this scene is funny, who does it make us so uncomfortable? It is because it hits too close to home. We realize that we too imagine Jesus the

way we want Jesus to be. We place on Jesus our image of culture, politics and our own personal preferences of what a God should be like. We fail to heed the commandment not to create or fashion a God out of our own image.

I think as we enter Advent and Christmas and focus our thinking on celebrating the birth of Jesus, it is important for us to remember just who Jesus is and why we worship Jesus. To help us do this, let's look at John's words from the Revelation. The book of Revelation might seem like a strange place to start our celebration of Advent, but Jesus' own words about his personhood helps us get our image of Jesus in right perspective as we enter a time of celebration of his birth, reflect on Jesus' life, and look forward to Jesus' coming.

hope

What is the setting of the Revelation? John, we know, has been exiled on the Isle of Patmos. John is an old man who has been waiting for Jesus to return as Jesus had promised. Instead of Jesus' return and God's kingdom coming, John represents the sorrow, hope and mystery of the church as they are trying to understand why Jesus has not yet returned and why they are now facing persecution for their faith. There was no kingdom of God, at least in the way they understood it, but instead a kingdom of Rome where the Christian was being persecuted and exiled. John is exiled and separated from his community of faith, and it is there that John receives this Revelation from Jesus that has it draped in mystery and images that still elude our complete understanding.

Yet, John's greeting and introduction is not

filled with images we do not understand or the mystery of the moment but with the certainty of God. John's greeting is a stating of that which does not change in a changing world. John's greeting gives us a proper understanding of Jesus so that the rest of the Revelation has meaning. Just like J.I Packer stated, it is important to have a proper understanding of Jesus before we read on in Revelation. It is this understanding that helps us as well in our preparation for Advent and Christmas. Just who is this coming Christ?

The declaration made by Jesus in Revelation is this: "I am the Alpha and Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." Jesus says in the Revelation "I am the beginning and end of all things. Before anything began, I was. When all is done, I will be. In a world that is constantly changing, I am present and constant." Then Jesus gives us three descriptions of his character that I think also give us insight into how to celebrate Advent. Let's look at those for a moment.

First, Jesus says "I am the one who was." Jesus is speaking of his preexistence. John's gospel makes the great claim that in the beginning was the Word – the word meaning Jesus – and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Then John states, "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). John reminds us in his gospel, and Jesus restates in Revelation that Jesus has always been. The one who has always been became flesh. That is the season we are preparing to celebrate.

Christmas is the celebration that the God who has always been became flesh like you and me. The place we begin our celebration of Advent and Christmas is remembering that Jesus was; that is, Jesus was preexistent. But for our purpose, Jesus was meaning "I have come before." The celebration of Christmas is the reminder that the one who is above time and beyond time entered time. The one who has no limitations accepted the limitations of humanity. We celebrate at Christmas that Jesus was an historical person who came and lived on this earth.

In recent years there has been a lot of attention in searching for the historical Jesus. What most scholars mean by this language is to ask the question "What can we discover about Jesus apart from the Bible? Are there other references to a person named Jesus of Nazareth as a human being who lived on this earth?" It is true that there is very little apart from the gos-

pels, not that the gospels ought to be dismissed so quickly when it comes to history, but there are some references. The historian Josephus mentions Jesus of Nazareth who had a following. There are other references to Jesus in the historical nature. The reason this is important is because it is a reminder that the Jesus we celebrate is the Jesus who came. The Jesus who was on this earth and walked this earth and experienced our world. Jesus who was became flesh.

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas through Advent the first thing I want us to remember is Jesus was sent from heaven for you and me. The past act of Jesus reminds us of two important things this Advent Season. Jesus' first coming is a reminder that we are loved and that we are forgiven. We find these words in the doxology of John.

John says "Jesus loved us and so freed us from our sins by his blood." First, you and I are loved by God. If there is anything we should remember this Advent Season, it is that we are loved by God. The Bible continually makes this assertion. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever might believe in him might not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Bible tells us plainly that God is love. Paul writes that it is his prayer that we might know how deep and how high and how wide is the love of God through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:18). Paul also asserts that nothing that has ever been or that will ever be in this world or the world to come can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39).

As simple as it sounds, Advent is a time to reflect on the fact that God loves us. Why is this important? It is important because there are sometimes in life that we must believe in God's love by faith and not by sight. There are some times that the events of life seem to suggest that we are not loved by God or, if we are, then God's love is ineffective and non-active. Just like a child who does not always understand the actions of her parents, we must find trust in a God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. There are times when life is a mystery that we must rest in the thought that God always acts out of love toward us.

Think of John on the Isle of Patmos seeing all the horrible sights the vision of the Revelation would bring; yet, the first few words that John writes is the reminder that we are loved by God.

The late Dr. Herbert Reynolds served as the president of Baylor University and its Chancellor from 1981 to 2000. He had a distinguished career as an educator. His field before administration was Clinical Psychology. He was the one who literally tested the first primates that were sent into space. At the death of this incredibly intelligent and influential man, his funeral was not held in an arena or convocation center on campus but in a church because he was a man of deep faith. It has been told that later in life he was facing a serious surgical treatment, and as he was being rolled into surgery, he was asked what he had been thinking as he prepared for surgery. They expected the great educator to say something profound. He did. He said the one thought that kept going through my mind was this "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so." That is the song they played and sung at his funeral.² This Advent, because Jesus came the first time, we must be reminded that we are loved by God.

The second thing we must remember this Advent is that we are forgiven. We are told that we are forgiven by his blood. Jesus came on a mission and that mission was our forgiveness by his death on the cross and his resurrection. We must never forget that we have a sin problem. I know that there is good in people. I know that there are good neighbors who might even profess to be atheists or agnostics. The very fact that we realize there is good and evil in people tells us that there is a basic human understanding of right and wrong and righteousness and sin. However, as good as we might want to be, the Bible is clear that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The wages of our sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23). We have a sin problem and we need forgiveness.

Advent is the reminder that God has forgiven us through Jesus Christ. The Bible is filled with moments of forgiveness and second chances. There is Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden because of their sin; yet, God still cared for their needs. Noah and his ark is a foreshadowing of God's grace in a time when the sin of humanity had caused God

to grieve his own creation of man and woman. Throughout the Bible there are moments when it seems that God's plans and purposes are going to be thwarted only for God to act out of love and give humanity another chance. That is what we call grace, and grace leads to forgiveness.

All of us need forgiveness. All of us need another chance. All of us need God's love and grace so that we might receive forgiveness. Advent is a time to remember that we have a sin problem. John reminds us that Jesus came the first time so that we might be forgiven once and for all from our sin. This coming Christ, whose birth we are getting ready to celebrate,

grew up, lived, and though he was tempted in every way, he was without sin. He died on our behalf and on the cross he took all of our sins so that we might be forgiven. This Advent Season is a time to remember that Jesus came and we are forgiven.

Jesus' proclamation is "I am the one who was and is and is to come." Jesus not only came, but he rose from the dead, and so we are reminded this Advent Season that we serve a living savior who is at work in this moment, just as he was when he walked this earth. John's doxology gives us insight into this living presence. It also gives us a third word to reflect on this season. That word is purpose.

Jesus came to show us God's love and to forgive us, but the living Jesus – the one who is – also gives our lives purpose. What is that purpose? It is described in two ways in this passage. First, it is to make us a kingdom of priests. The priest is the one who is God's representative to humanity and humanity's representative to God. Yet, instead of there being one priest or a tribe of priests Jesus is creating a kingdom of priests. In other words we are all priests, which means that we all are God's representative to this world and we are this world's representatives to God.

This means we have responsibility. When the world looks at us they are to see Christ. How we choose to love, act, respond, care, share, give, and live day to day is testimony to Christ. In the same way we bring the hurting, pain, grief and yes, even the sinfulness of others before God. We intercede out of love before



***"If we choose to
think about
Jesus, then let's
make sure we
think about
Jesus as Jesus
really is."***

God on behalf of those who do not know Christ. We are priests.

We are to bring glory to God. That is our purpose. Jesus, the one who is our living Lord, is always at work in our lives so that we might bring glory to God in all that we do.

In "Letters to Rulers of People," Francis of Assisi wrote these words: "Keep a clear eye toward life's end. Do not forget your purpose and destiny as God's creature. What you are in his sight is what you are and nothing more. Remember, that when you leave this earth, you can take nothing that you have received -- fading symbols of honor, trappings of power -- but only what you have given: a full heart enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage."

Advent is the reminder that we serve a living savior who gives us purpose for living.

Finally, Advent is a reminder that we have hope. Jesus' statement is that he is the one who was and is and is to come. *Is to come* is the reminder of hope. The doxology reminds us of this hope. "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him" (Revelation 1:7). These were words of great hope when John wrote them down. What had happened since Jesus' resurrection and ascension? The disciples had been scattered. Some of the disciples had been martyred. The church was under persecution from Rome. John was exiled. That is not how the script was supposed to go. Jesus was to suppose to return and set up his kingdom and everyone who had crucified him and dismissed him would know that Jesus was Lord. Yet, nothing had happened. Now in the waiting here is the promise for the future: "Behold he is coming." The Christ who was and is is also the one who is coming. The coming Christ gives us hope.

Our lives are in need of a dose of hope. This past year has been a difficult year for so many people. There are those who have lost jobs. There are those who have lost loved ones. There are those who feel a sense of loss of security for the future. There is also an uneasiness and insecurity in our culture as a whole. The world's troubles seem too large for any person, administration, nation or political system to

fix. Everything just seems complicated. What we need is hope. The coming Christ is our word of hope.

I recently went to see the movie *The Blindside*. It is a great movie of sharing, caring and hope. The true story of how Michael Orr went from being a homeless teenager to a number one draft pick in the NFL draft last year. It occurred because someone cared and a family took a risk with a boy that everyone else had cast to the side. When Michael was given the opportunity to attend a private school in Memphis there is a scene as he enters the school grounds for the first day of school. As he enters he notices an archway and on the arch are these words:

This is possible with man
All things are possible with God.

It is true there are many things we can do seemingly on our own, but we know we have our limitations. We understand that sometimes we reach the end of our resources and choices. It is then that we realize that what we need is something beyond our self. We need hope. We need the possibilities of God.

Advent is a season to reclaim hope because Jesus is coming.

Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent. What will you think about these next four weeks as we make our journey to the manger to celebrate the birth of Jesus? Will it be a season filled with distractions, anxiety, consumerism and stress or will you and I take the time to think about Jesus? If we choose to think about Jesus then, let's make sure we think about Jesus as Jesus really is. Jesus is the one who was and is and is to come. So this Advent, let's let the words of Jesus guide our reflection. Jesus has come: in his first coming we are reminded of his love and forgiveness. Jesus rose again and is a living savior: let's remember that Jesus gives our lives purpose. Jesus is coming again: let's not let go of the hope that Jesus gives to the uncertain future. This Advent, let's not forget the Coming Christ. ❁

¹J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, *Praying: Finding Our Way Through Duty to Delight* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

²As heard from Joel Gregory at Campbell University Divinity School Lectures, 2010.

