

First Sunday of Advent, 2010
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I would like to do three things in this homily—deal with the strangeness of the second coming of Christ as its often portrayed in popular literature, describe the pitfalls and potentials of waiting on Christ, and speak about the actual second coming of Christ.

We Catholics get pretty freaked out about the second coming of Christ. Other types of Christians, when it comes to the second coming, seem to have no problem predicting the exact date, the exact hour, the color of the sky, the mark to the beast, the signs of the times.

There are popular apocalyptic books, like the Left Behind series that are based precisely on today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Two will be in the field and one will be taken, the other left behind. Catholics, even though we have pretty active imaginations ourselves, don't like to picture this event. We get uneasy when asked to imagine two people in a field and one being vaporized—or teleported—into heaven like some character from Star Trek. Perhaps you've seen the bumper stickers—in case of rapture this car will be empty. As if at the second coming of Christ all the good people get transported out of this tired old world.

Well, let's get one thing clear. In the days of Matthew they didn't have Star Trek or Star Wars. No teleporters existed in their imaginations. This section about two people grinding at a mill and one being left behind while the other is taken, is a reference to the Babylonian Captivity of Israel. When Babylon came into Israel they took some people hostage and left others behind. When Matthew's gospel listeners heard this passage they immediately thought of the very real event from their past—people being taken hostage against their will to a foreign land. This part of Matthew is about the unexpected nature of the second coming of Jesus, not

about people being beamed up to heaven. The second coming of Christ is unexpected because we know neither the time nor the hour. Jesus himself startlingly admitted that he himself knew neither the hour nor the time. We've been waiting for two thousand years, we've been waiting all our lives for the promise of the creed we will profess in a few moments—I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, Amen. It's been a long wait for most of us, and the waiting continues, unless something very dramatic happens in the next few minutes.

No, instead of raptures and the strangeness of people being vaporized, this Gospel is about the very real second coming of Christ. It's about our waiting for the second coming and the second coming itself. First a little about the waiting.

There are many ways to wait for something. As a kid I remember waiting for Santa Claus in the weeks and days leading up to Christmas. I thought I would explode with anticipation before he would arrive to the house and fill it with gifts from the Sears catalog that I had thumbed so thoroughly in the months leading up to the big day. As a kid I remember waiting in the back seat of the car as we drove to Florida for a vacation. The boring highway seemed to grow longer with each passing mile. Compared to the surf and sun of Florida, Georgia was a hellish place filled with four-lane expressways, filling stations, and non-descript rest stops. The waiting was interminable. In high school, I couldn't wait to graduate and get to college, then college came and I couldn't wait to graduate and get on to real life. The future was tantalizingly close and the future always seemed to hold the solution to the present. By middle-age now, there are few things that I haven't waited for and even fewer things that have lived up to the expectations.

We've grown pretty weary of waiting.

Now once again we've entered Advent, the Church's official season of waiting. And I must admit it's tough to get excited, it's tough to have the anticipation of a child on the way to Florida or a child on Christmas eve. You and I have waited for quite a while and waiting isn't all that much fun. We have in a sense become professional wasters of time—standing in lines, standing in traffic, waiting for the check in the mail, the test results, the grades to come in, waiting for whatever is next. Waiting has become routine, second nature, the meaning of life.

We can wait so long that we become numb. This is what's happened to the hearers of the gospel today. When the author of Matthew wrote the gospel, the listeners, the early Christians had become very bored with the waiting on the day of the Lord. Just a generation or so before, everyone was practically frothing at the mouth in anticipation of the day of the Lord. Then, when it became clear that the Lord's return was not just around the corner, people got a little bored with all the waiting. The day of the lord became some far off reality—or fantasy, more like it.

I encourage you to reexamine your waiting this advent. Breathe a little life into the dull waiting. In a poem by Galway Kinnell, the speaker of the poem encourages a friend who has grown weary with waiting:

The speaker says:

Wait, for now.

Distrust everything, if you have to.

But trust the hours. Haven't they
carried you everywhere, up to now?

Personal events will become interesting again.

Hair will become interesting.

Pain will become interesting.

Buds that open out of season will become lovely again.

Second-hand gloves will become lovely again,

their memories are what give them
the need for other hands. And the desolation
of lovers is the same: that enormous emptiness
carved out of such tiny beings as we are
asks to be filled; the need
for the new love is faithfulness to the old.

The message of this poem is essentially the message of today's
gospel—stay awake, don't go to sleep, don't numb yourself to
everyday experience. Stay awake, notice everything around you.
Oh, I know, there is plenty in life to cause us to want to numb
ourselves to what goes on around us. There is enough going on in
the world right now to make us lose interest in waiting. We have a
hard time keeping up with each moment.

Grow into your waiting. Steep in your waiting and begin to notice
what's gone unnoticed. Wake up and live each moment. Things
will become interesting again. Count on memories of past
fulfillment to fuel your hope for what is to come in each moment
that life gives you. Hair will become interesting, pain will become
interesting. The need for the new love is faithfulness to the old.
Our need for Christ in the past is what gives us energy and grace to
recognize that need for Christ in our present life. Stay faithful to
the need for Christ's grace.

Finally, as you know advent is divided into two parts. The first two
weeks are about the second coming—today's theme. While the last
two weeks of advent focus remembering the coming of Christ in
his infancy. The second one is usually easier to wrap our minds
around. Christ did come as a baby in a manger. We see images of
this all around us and we know that it happened. That's a coming
that we can count on cause it already happened. The second
coming? That's a little tougher. What is it, in fact that we wait
upon, and what do we do to get ready for this coming that has yet
to happen?

Well, for one thing, we don't wait on a baby in a manger any more. We wait on the fully grown, fully resurrected Christ, the one who was raised from the dead by God, the victor over sin and death. The one who will inspire us to beat our swords into plowshares. We wait for the adult Christ, no longer a helpless babe amidst a vicious world, but the conqueror of all that is evil and all that is opposed to peace. We wait on the one who encourages us to share what we've been given with our neighbors. The time for waiting on a little baby to be born into this complex world is over, we are waiting on an adult who gets us. Who knows us better than we know ourselves. In this sense, it should be easier to get into this waiting on the second coming. We pick up where the Easter season leaves off—the Christ of Easter morning waits in the wings and looks for places where he is most in need. There he will come again into our messy world.

Get yourselves ready for the coming of the one who loves us. Get your affairs in order. Repent of your sins that need forgiveness, now's the chance to turn thins around that need to be turned around. Now is the chance, now is the appointed time to get jazzed up about Jesus coming back. Oh and trust me he comes back everyday. As the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins looking at the world around him reminds us:

Nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings

In the meantime, before Christ's Kingdom comes in its fullness—a day more glorious than the first light of Easter morning—we have Jesus here in this word of the Gospel and in

the body and blood of his self-offering. Let us continue our waiting together by coming together as his body, his chosen people, to be nourished with the food he gives us as strength for the continued wait.