

## The Three Comings of Our Lord

a sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent given by  
the Rev. Dr. Stephen L. White  
at  
Grace Church  
Great Barrington, Massachusetts  
December 9, 2018

I'm about to give you the best Advent sermon ever preached. In case you're thinking I've gotten a bit full of myself, please notice that I did not say that I'm going to preach the best Advent sermon you've ever heard. I just said I'm going to give you the best one ever preached. And it was preached about 1,000 years ago at a monastery in France.

When most people think of the season of Advent, they think it as a time of preparation for Christmas and a time of recalling Israel's long wait for the Messiah – the chosen one of God. We think of the hymn "Come oh come, Emmanuel."

Others may think of a kind of double meaning of Advent – as a time not only of commemorating the wait for the first coming of the Messiah, but also as a time of anticipation of the second coming of Christ in great glory at the end of time. This second theme of Advent is also reflected in hymns like this:

*Lo! he comes, with clouds descending,  
once for our salvation slain;  
thousand thousand saints attending  
swell the triumph of his train:  
Alleluia! alleluia! alleluia!  
Christ the Lord returns to reign.*

In most parish churches these are the twin themes that we most often sing about, hear sermons about, and think about during Advent.

But wait! There's more!

I think the best sermon ever preached on Advent was given by St. Bernard of Clairvaux who was born in the year 1090 and died in 1153. And he had a lot more to say about Advent than those twin themes. Bernard was the founder of the Cistercian order, also called Trappists which was a reformed order of Benedictines – sort of monks on steroids. And since monks meet every day to receive instruction from their abbot, St. Bernard had to write many "sermons" or instructions for his new band of monks in north-central France. Those sermons were long — over an hour. But not to worry - this one will be the usual 12 minute Episcopal version.

In one of these sermons, St. Bernard wrote about not two comings of Christ as we usually think of them, but three – or as he put it, "the three comings of the Lord." And he believed that Advent is the chief metaphor for our lives — the chief metaphor for our lives — and for that reason Advent is, after Easter, the most important season of the church year for Trappists. And perhaps it should be for us as well.

Here is how St. Bernard describes the three comings of the Lord. Listen carefully:

*"In his first coming our Lord came in our flesh and in our weakness; in his middle coming he comes in spirit and in power; in the final coming he will be seen in glory and majesty."*

He sees the "middle" Advent — his third advent — as how we spend our entire lives as Christians. He goes on to say:

*"This middle advent is a sort of road by which we travel from the first to the last..."In this coming he is our comfort."*

So, here's something to think and pray about this Advent: Does this resonate with your experience? Is your life a journey between the first coming of Christ and his second coming at the end of time? And is Christ a comfort for you along the way?

St. Bernard knew that not everyone would think of Christ as a comfort along the way, so he reminded his monks – and us – what Jesus had to say about that in the gospel of John:

*"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him." (John 14:23)*

Have you had such an experience – of God coming to you? Maybe you have and just didn't realize it at the time. That's okay, because St. Bernard had the same problem! Check out what he said about his own experience of God coming to him. See if you don't think it's a little vague! The fact that he's a little vague is part of the point he's making.

*"I admit that the Word has also come to me – and I speak foolishly – has come often. As often as he has come to me, I have not perceived the different times of his coming...I perceived that he has been present, I remembered that he had been there. Sometimes I was able to anticipate his coming, but I never felt it, nor its departing either...Even now I don't know whence he came into my soul and where he went...and by what way he entered and left..."*

St. Bernard is basically saying that he's not sure he recognized God's coming at the times when it happened, but he's pretty sure that it did happen many times and that it changed him profoundly. I think any one of us could say the very same thing.

In order for us to experience Christ as a comfort in this "middle" Advent, we have to make time for God in our busy lives. We have to wait patiently for God to be made manifest to us however God chooses to do that. And while we wait, we pray. Sometimes prayer and meditation is anticipating God's presence in our hearts and it's also savoring the delicious memory of God's presence after the experience has left us.

And we have to speak to God — and allow God to speak to us — in God's own language. Hebrew? No. Greek? No. Latin? No. Definitely not English either. God's language is the language that is the hardest to learn, harder than Chinese, harder than any other language. God's language is silence. God speaks to us in silence. And so we have to make times for silence.

A news reporter once interviewed Mother Theresa on American television. He asked her about prayer:

*"What do you say to God when you pray," he asked.*

*"Nothing," she replied. "I just listen."*

So the skeptical reporter asked, "What does God say to you?"

“Nothing,” replied Mother Theresa. “He just listens.”

She listened for God to speak to her in silence and in silence God spoke. We can do what she did and get the same amazing results.

It is in silence, listening for God to speak in silence, that we become who we were made to be. Another monk, a friend of mine named Brother Thomas Bezanson, once wrote “We are all born with a soul, but we have to acquire a spirit.” Acquiring a spirit by allowing Christ to come to us in spirit and power in silence and contemplation — allowing Christ to come to us while we do the ordinary chores of life like empty the dishwasher or brush our teeth.

So as we await the coming of the Lord in all these three different and inter-related manifestations, here are some catchwords that capture the essence of this holy season:

- Watching
- Waiting
- Wakefulness
- Anticipation
- Vigilance
- Prayerfulness
- Excitement
- Remembering

And remember this — it’s not over on Christmas. As St. Bernard told his monks in the greatest Advent sermon ever given, our lives are a continual Advent!