

Christmas: The Sequel

Every year it seems we get subjected to more and more Christmas creep. The beginning of the holiday season keeps getting bumped up earlier and earlier into the fall.

Commercially, the Christmas season swings into high gear the day after Halloween. But even Sacred Heart Hospital has had a decorated Christmas tree up for some time now.

If you've looked at the sermon title today, you may be thinking we at St. John's have joined the stampede to the head of the Christmas line. We haven't even gotten to Advent yet, much less Christmas, so why would we be talking about the *sequel* to Christmas?

We're doing this because the lectionary for this year includes something I have never seen before: the season of the End Times has been included in the church calendar. This encompasses all four Sundays in November.

As I mentioned last week, we are in the midst of Gospel readings that all have to do with how people act in the absence of the master. The absence in all cases is understood to be only temporary. It's the lull before the storm.

There are lessons to be learned in this lull. But the lull sets up the rousing conclusion, the great reckoning that comes when the master returns. The Second Coming. The End of Time.

The first coming of Jesus is what we celebrate at Christmas. It is a celebration of the most glorious event imaginable: God Immanuel. Christmas is the amazing story of God coming into our world to shower love and grace and hope on all people.

We've already seen this show, we're very familiar with it and it is such a beloved story that when we hear there is a sequel: The Return of Jesus, we can hardly wait to line up and get our tickets so we can experience the awesome presence of God once again.

Generally speaking, sequels don't live up to the standard of the original. An original story that can capture the hearts and imagination of people is a rare thing. It's like catching lightning in a bottle.

A sequel tries to get the lightning back in the bottle, without just repeating the original story. That's a very difficult task.

The sequel has to take the story in a new direction, and the odds are overwhelmingly poor that this new direction is going to recapture the magic of the original.

How does that apply to Christmas: The Sequel? The Second Coming of Jesus? The story of Christmas is pure, profound, and clear.

Love came down at Christmas. God, despite being a person of such overwhelming power that we cannot come close to understanding the scope of it, chose to abandon all that power for just for us, who in the grand scheme of things are less significant than grains of sand.

God chose to willingly experience cold and hunger and pain for our sake, to share with us, to show us who God is, to show us what love is, to show us what life is.

Having experienced that incredible story, we would love nothing better than to experience another story like it. But how do you equal that story, much less top it?

I would argue that it isn't humanly possible, and that is the problem with our attempts to deal with the Second Coming. So many people have tried to create a blockbuster sequel to Christmas. You can find all kinds of sensational literature and movies and songs promoting these attempts.

They usually go something like this:

Days were filled with guns and war
And everything got trampled on the floor
I wish we'd all been ready

Two men walking up a hill
One disappears and one's left standing still
I wish we'd all been ready

There's no time to change your mind
The Son has come and you've been left behind

A man and wife asleep in bed
She hears a noise and turn her head, he's gone
I wish we'd all been ready.

There's no time to change your mind
How could you have been so blind?
The Father spoke, the demons dined
The Son has come and you've been left behind.

I'm sorry, that's one of the worst songs I've ever heard, and I'm embarrassed to sing it. It takes the beauty and wonder, the peace to all people on earth, and the joyful shouts of the angels and shepherds at Christmas, and changes it into a monster guilt trip.

Much of the talk we hear these days about the End Times does the same thing.

All this stuff about the Rapture, and Gog and Magog, and the battle of Armageddon, and identifying the Antichrist, and all these signs and portents in world politics that show how God is about to lay waste to all of creation turn the Christmas sequel into *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

It certainly sells, in the way that mediocre action films with exploding buildings, zombies, and a high body count sell. It sells because in our world, fear sells.

But as a sequel to the Christmas story, it is beyond cringe-worthy. It is nothing like the original. Despite the sequel-writers' claims, there is nothing Biblical about that story.

The only way you can find anything like the popularly acclaimed Rapture doctrine is to take a small piece of 1st Thessalonians 4, splice it into a statement Jesus that made in Luke 17 about two people working in a field or sleeping in bed and one will be taken and the other left, and then dub in some Last Days imagery from Ezekiel and Revelation.

Only if you mix all that together, and let your imagination run wild, can you come up with a story about Christians being snatched up all at once into heaven, and the unbelieving heathens being left behind.

Only if you believe that the Book of Revelation is a weird Biblical endorsement of the occult, written in a code that only conspiracy theorists can crack rather than an apocalyptic writing filled with poetic images to strengthen and give hope to persecuted 2nd century Christians, can you believe it is a trailer giving us a preview of the last days.

Only if you totally ignore Jesus' repeated statements in Matthew that the End Times will come like a thief in the night, and that no one can predict when that will be, can you swallow the premise that we are in the End Times.

It seems like there are two opposite reactions to the subject of End Times and the Second Coming of Jesus. One is terror and the other indifference. In our Gospel and in Thessalonians, we learn that neither is helpful.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians who are worried about the End Times, that they are not children of darkness, but children of the light. Children of darkness live in

constant fear, and let fear rule their lives. In *The Monster at the End of the Book*, Grover was a good example of a child of darkness.

He is utterly clueless. He doesn't know what lies ahead. The unknown scares him. He lets his imagination run so wild that he panics and loses all perspective. In his mind, the end is a horrible thing and he is terrified of it.

He is very much like the third servant in our Gospel for today, the one entrusted with one talent. He was terrified of the future. So paralyzed that he could not act. Because of his fear of the future, he wasted his opportunity to do something with the talent his Master had given to him.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul is writing as a pastor to a congregation that fully expects Jesus to return to earth in their lifetime, as does Paul. They believe that Jesus is coming again to be reunited with all Christians on earth.

What they want to know is, what will happen to those who have already died? Did those people miss out on this great event? Are they going to be with us? Are they gone forever? Are we ever going to see them? When we enter into the joy of the Second Coming, are they going to be left behind?

Paul is dealing with fears and anxieties about the future.

And he responds the way Christians have always responded to those fears. "We are not children of darkness," he says, "but children of light." The children who read that story with me were children of the light.

They weren't afraid of what was to come no matter how much Grover tried to scare them. They knew they had nothing fear from going forward. In fact, while Grover was fearing the end, they looked forward to the end.

That's the attitude a Christian should have toward the end times. Trust in the promises of God and your soul will find rest. Trust God to write a sequel to Christmas that will be even better than the original.

Paul is also dealing with the opposite reaction: complacency. Some of the Thessalonians think there's no point in getting too invested in life. Let's just sit and wait for the Second Coming. Paul answers this by saying, *Let us not sleep as others do but keep awake.*

He's making a direct reference to those Gospel parables about the Master's absence. He tells the Thessalonians we not supposed to be just sitting around waiting for

Jesus to return, as the one-talent servant did. The point of life is to use the time wisely, in the service of others.

Paul invites the Thessalonians to let the Second Coming shape who they are and what they do. He tells them to keep the End in sight at all times.

That's why I chose this children's book for today. It is a story where the ending completely dominates entire story. Every page is overshadowed by what is going to happen at the end. The end is in sight at all times.

Keeping the end in sight at all times is so important for a Christian. Contrary to what the sequel writers say, we do not live in the end times. But they are coming.

We don't live in the world that Isaiah foresaw, where swords are beaten into plowshares, where nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

But it's coming.

We don't live in the world that Amos foresaw, where justice rolls down like mountains and righteousness like an ever-living stream.

But it's coming.

We don't live in the world that Revelations promised, where God will wipe every tear from our eyes, where death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

But it's coming.

We are invited to be a part of that process, to get in on the action now, to enjoy a foretaste of the feast to come.

I have mentioned before about my dad near the end of his days. At the end of a funeral service for his best friend, he was quietly standing alone with a smile of wonderment. We asked what he was thinking. He said he was thing about death. He could hardly wait to find out what comes next.

The End Times are all about trust. We have seen the original, the Christmas story. We know what that was all about.

The Bible tells us there is a sequel to the Christmas story in the works.

There is no way we can write a sequel that comes close to matching that. Fortunately, God is the one writing the sequel. And God's promise is that the sequel, the Second Coming, is going to be even better than the original.

Glory be to God in heaven and peace to those whom God favors! Amen.