

The Haphazard Coming of Christmas
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Matthew 24:36-44

Imagine a world in which Christmas didn't come on December 25th, but with the first snowfall of the year.

The people of that world couldn't count on a certain number of shopping days before Christmas; they would have to do their shopping early, have their presents wrapped and ready by the first cold snap of the season. The procrastinators would not be racing desperately through department stores on December 24th, but whenever the North wind blew and woolly gray clouds hung low in the sky. In some parts of the world that would be earlier than others. "Christmas could come today," signs would say in store windows. And advertisers would blare: "Don't let it catch you unprepared!"

For children, of course, it would be different; each blustery day would be pregnant with possibility. From the middle of October on they would leap from their beds in the morning and rush to the window, hoping to see the ground blanketed with white. At the breakfast table they would ask their parents: "Do you think it might come today? Do you think it will come tomorrow?" The most popular show on television would be the evening news with its weather report. Children would huddle around the set hoping that on this night, as he did several times each year, the weatherman would put on his Santa Claus hat and predict snow. "What's that?" he would ask. "Do I hear jingle bells? Yes, boys and girls, they had Christmas in Denver, Colorado, yesterday and it looks like its coming our way!" No child would sleep well on a night like that, getting up several times to look out the window and see if flakes of snow were swirling around the

streetlight on the corner. And what a disappointment to find, at the first light of dawn, the same brown grass on the ground that had been there the day before.

Ah, but when it did come! The little girl cutting a snowman out of white construction paper would look out the window of her first grade classroom and see that first flake of snow drift down out of the sky. “Christmas is HERE!” she would scream, and the others would leap up from their places and rush to the window to see for themselves. “It is! It IS!” they would shout. “Look! There goes another flake, and another, and another!” Little girls would grab each other by the hands and twirl around the room, their pigtails flying. Little boys would start counting off on their fingers for their friends the toys they would get that day. Teachers would sigh with relief and join the pandemonium, as grateful as their students that it had finally come. “May I have your attention, please?” the principal would announce over the loudspeaker, in a big jolly voice. “It looks like Christmas is here!” And the official announcement would bring on a second round of jubilation, so that his instructions about the departure of school buses could hardly be heard over the roar.

It would be strange, wouldn't it, living in a world like that? It would be so different from the scheduled way we celebrate Christmas now. But it would be much more like that unscheduled first Christmas, and almost exactly like the unscheduled second coming of Christ. “But about that day and hour no one knows,” Jesus says, “neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Anyone who has waited for a baby to come can tell you that they don't always come on schedule. You can't really put that trip to the hospital on your calendar. You just do all you can to be ready and then you wait for labor to begin. It must have been

that way for Joseph and Mary. It was certainly that way for Christy and me. In my journal for December 17, 1990, is this entry: "It's 6:00 on a Monday morning and there is much to be done. Not the least of which is keeping morale up. Ten days past the due date we still haven't had a baby. Every night I lay out a change of clothes thinking 'This will be the night!' And every morning I swallow my disappointment and put on those same clothes. I know the baby will come, but I don't know when. Living in a state of constant readiness is difficult. Learning that in the Season of Advent seems oddly appropriate, but not especially comforting. Is this how we are supposed to wait for the second coming of Christ? With clothes laid out beside the bed? With calluses on our knees? Probably so. Even so, come Lord Jesus. And come little Catherine. We have been waiting for you for so long. It will be such a joy to hold you in our arms and fall in love with your sweet face. Could it be today?"

Less than twenty-four hours after that entry Catherine did come, but even so Christy and I barely made it to the hospital. Try as you might to be ready the birth of a child can sneak up on you, like the first snow of winter, like a thief in the night. The coming of Christ caught his mother in a strange town, miles away from the comforts of home and the help of her local midwife. "Not now," she groaned when the first pain came. "Not here." She must have known that it would come soon, but if she had known exactly when the child would come don't you think she might have been better prepared, and not caught giving birth in a barn? But the Second Coming of Christ is even less predictable and so, says Jesus, we must be ready all the time, with our clothes laid out, and calluses on our knees.

But also with our hearts full of hope, like children waiting for Christmas to come, like a woman expecting a child. For so long the idea of the Second Coming has been wrapped in such frightening images that we have stopped talking about it much in sophisticated churches like this one. “For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man,” Jesus warns in our Gospel lesson. “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matthew 24:37-44).

It’s a little frightening, isn’t it? All that talk about floods catching people unaware, and others being snatched away, and thieves breaking into the house? Earlier in this same chapter Jesus talks about the sun being darkened, and the moon not giving its light, and the stars falling from the sky. He talks about great suffering, such as has never been from the beginning of the world until now, and never will be again. He talks about fleeing to the mountains, and he pities those who are pregnant or nursing infants in those days. “Pray that it might not happen in winter,” he says. All of which only makes you want to skip chapter 24 altogether and turn back to those first couple of chapters where

you can read about the birth of a baby whose name was called Immanuel, “God with us.” That would be better, wouldn’t it? Certainly more comforting.

But the world in which we now live will not be corrected by such a silent night as that first one. At the deepest level of our need we long for the coming of someone who will have the power to do what needs to be done: to make the wrong right, the crooked straight, the rough places plain. We look for the one who will let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). The early Christians, who suffered persecution at the hands of the world and who were powerless to stop it prayed for the Second Coming of Christ. They had heard of his return from his disciples and they waited for it with pounding hearts, watching the skies like children longing for the first snowfall of winter. “*Maranatha!*” they prayed. “Come, Lord Jesus!” Because they believed with all their hearts that the one who came again would be the same one who had come before.

I believe that. And I believe that if we haven’t yet earnestly prayed for the Second Coming of Christ then we haven’t yet understood how much our world is in need of such deliverance. I remember how it was in those days after September 11, 2001. I was a pastor in Washington, DC, one of the two cities that had been hit. In the months that followed we watched the skies not for the first flakes of snow but for airplanes being used as missiles against us. We lived in that state of constant readiness not for the birth of a baby but for the next terrorist attack. Perhaps for the first time in centuries we, like those early Christians, began to see the real need for the Second Coming, and begin to long for it and pray for it. Surely if anyone could set the world right it would be Jesus Christ. With that in mind we might want to ask ourselves the question: if Jesus were to

come again, just because we need him, just because we've waited so long, would we be ready? Because if there's any truth to this text—and I think there is—his coming will be like Christmas in that other world, not on any given date, but simply when the time is right. And when that time comes we wouldn't want to be caught sleeping. We would want to be wide awake, looking out our bedroom windows, ready to shout at the first sign of a snowflake, "It's HERE!"

So, as you shop for presents in the weeks ahead, as you trim the tree and string the lights, as you stock the pantry and send out cards, as you get ready in all those ways for the annual celebration that will come on December 25th, don't forget to get ready for that other celebration that will come...

...like the first flake of snow.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2019