

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”

Matthew 25:31-46 (read 31-40) ¹

From December to December there’s been a lot of water over the dam. For one thing, we are one year older than we were last December. Kids have gotten older. Sewer pipes have corroded and been replaced. Roofs have been patched and houses painted. Some of us have been audited by the IRS. There have been many funerals and fewer weddings. Every one of us lives in the shadow of COVID hour after hour and day after day.

And, in the middle of it all, Advent comes. Advent? Yes, Advent! The promise that in the middle of the mess we’re in we’re not alone. The promise of Hope when the wind blows and the days are shorter. The time when we once again run smack-dab into mystery, wonder, and miracle.

Who among us doesn’t need some wonder since last December? God knows we need to hear some angels sing most days. We need some promise that in it all God is present and is with us. Like beggars, we reach out our hands hoping that Christmas will happen to us. And so, this year, like all years, we gather to say together,

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in thee.

But, though we sing the words with fervor, do we really expect Him to come?
I mean, *really*?

Do you know Tolstoy’s lovely story about the Russian cobbler, Martin Avdeich?
It goes like this:

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In a certain town in Russia there lived a cobbler, Martin Avdeich by name. He had a tiny room in a basement, one window of which looked out on the street. Through it he could see only the feet of those who passed by, but Martin recognized many people by their boots, which he had repaired. He had plenty to do, for he worked well, used good material, and did not charge much.

Now it so happened that Martin bought himself a Bible, meaning at first to read it only on holy days. But, once begun, it made his heart so light that he read it every day. One night, having fallen asleep while reading his Bible, Martin started from his sleep at the sound of a voice. No one was there, but he heard the words quite distinctly: “Martin! Martin! Look out into the street tomorrow, for I shall come.”

Next morning Martin rose before daylight, lit the fire, prepared his breakfast, and began work, though he looked out the window more than he worked. Whenever anyone passed with unfamiliar boots, he would look up to see the face. Presently an old man called Stepanich, who worked nearby, began clearing the snow in front of Martin’s window. Soon he leaned his shovel against the wall and tried to get warm. Martin went to the door and beckoned, “Come in,” he said, “and warm yourself.”

“May God bless you!” Stepanich answered. As he came in, he tottered and nearly fell. Martin gave him two glasses of hot tea, and told him the experience of the previous night.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 29, 2020. The First Sunday of Advent.

Stepanich went away, and Martin sat down to stitch a boot. As he looked out the window, a woman in peasant shoes passed and stopped by the wall. Martin saw that she was poorly dressed, a baby in her arms.

With her back to the wind, she was trying to wrap the baby close to her, though she wore only shabby summer clothes. Martin went out and invited them in. He received her graciously, offering them bread and soup, and giving them a cloak to take with them. Again, he told the story of his promised visit, and saw her out.

Sitting down again to work, Martin looked up every time a shadow fell on the window to see who was passing. After a while he saw an old apple woman passing by, and as she passed his window, a young boy snatched an apple from her cart. The old woman seized the boy by his hair, and he screamed. As Martin ran out into the street, the woman was threatening to take the boy to the police.

“Let him go, Granny,” Martin said. “Forgive him, for Christ’s sake.” The old woman let go. “Ask Granny’s forgiveness,” Martin told the boy.

As Martin paid for the apple, the old woman said, “The rascal ought to be whipped!” “Oh, Granny,” said Martin, “if he should be whipped for stealing an apple, what should be done to us for our sins?”

Again Martin returned to his work. Soon he could not see to work any longer, and he put his tools away with disappointment. Then he took his Bible from the shelf. Hearing footsteps, he turned around. A Voice whispered in his ear, “Martin, Martin! Don’t you know me?”

“Who is it?” muttered Martin.

“It is I,” said the Voice. And out of a dark corner of the room came Stepanich, who smiled, and, vanishing like a cloud, was seen no more.

“It is I,” said the Voice again. And out stepped the woman with the baby in her arms. She smiled and the baby laughed, and they, too, vanished.

“It is I,” said the Voice once more. The old apple woman and the boy stepped out, smiled, and then vanished.

Martin’s soul grew glad. He began reading the Gospel where the Bible had chanced to open. At the top of the page he read, “For I was hungry, and you gave me meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in.” And at the bottom of the page he read, “Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it unto me.”

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And so it is, my friends, that Jesus comes to us, sometimes in the likeness of persons we do not know, but more often in the faces of persons that we do know, which is the harder test. There are people in all of the circles of our lives, whom we touch every day, and we do not even see them. Some of them are cantankerous; some we don’t like; and some of them we really don’t want to love; but they are there. There are there for us to love, to care for, and to draw to Jesus.

So how are we to respond when Jesus, the Long-Expected One, comes to us in the person of someone we do not want to love? One of my seminary professors was sharing this concept when a student named Jim blurted out, “Dr. Thompson, I have all kinds of problems

with that!” The impact of the moment had overwhelmed him. The words had touched an area of his life that contained bitterness he didn’t know how to deal with.

He said, “You don’t understand! You grew up in a Christian home. But my father abandoned my mother and me twenty-six and a half years ago. I am twenty-seven years old. I have never seen him. I do not want to see him!”

Dr. Thompson turned and wrote on the board a free translation of Matthew 6:14-15: “Because of the love of Jesus and his forgiveness in my life, I must be ready to forgive if I am to be forgiven.” Then he said, “In other words, you don’t give people what they deserve. You give them what they need. Your father doesn’t deserve forgiveness; but neither do I, and neither do you.”

Tears were trickling down Jim’s cheeks. The Holy Spirit descended upon that classroom. Jim said, “What must I do? I don’t know where my father is. He may not even be alive.” Dr. Thompson replied, “It doesn’t matter. Your problem is your attitude. You take that to God, let him tell you what to do, and leave it there. If God helps you to find your father, you will know what to do.”

Weeks passed. One day Jim came dashing into class about two feet off the ground, saying, “Dr. Thompson, Dr. Thompson! I have something to say. I just have to share it. I cannot wait! Last night I received a telephone call, and the voice on the other end said, ‘Jim? Son? . . . although I have no right to call you son. I have heard you are at the seminary preparing for the ministry, and I thought you would like to know that recently I gave my life to Jesus Christ. Can you ever forgive me for what I have done?’” **It was the Long-Expected Jesus . . . come to earth in the form of a derelict father whose soul had been healed!**

When we think of receiving Jesus and of caring for Him, we probably think of “the least of these” as being persons we don’t know very well, if at all. Yet the truth of the matter is that if we are not willing or able to be the channel of God’s love to meet the needs of those in our immediate family, we may as well forget about helping anyone else. For if there are ruptured relationships between us and those in our family, there is going to be a rupture of the flow of the Holy Spirit through our lives.

When we have ruptured relationships horizontally, with other people, we also have a ruptured relationship vertically, with God. It’s not that we do not know the Lord. It’s just that Jesus is not really Lord of our lives.

We’re not willing to let Him be Lord of everything and to accept people on His conditions, not ours. Jesus clearly said that we are to forgive, to be the first to offer reconciliation. And He said that if we are not willing to forgive, we render ourselves unforgivable.

Often the first thing that comes to mind when we think about confessing a ruptured relationship is, “Well, if I am a Christian and I admit that I have been wrong in an attitude or whatever, what will the other person think of me?” So who cares what she thinks of us? Look at what he will think of Jesus if we do not make the relationship right! His name was Jerry, and it happened like this:

I work in Dallas and I drive my motorbike to work every day. For the last several days, as I pulled into the parking lot, I noticed a bike exactly like mine, only it didn’t have a mirror. When I came out to the parking lot one night, my mirror was missing. So I walked down to the other bike, and there it was. My mirror was on his bike. I knew it was my mirror, because it was marked.

I took my mirror off his bike and was so angry that I flooded his bike. It didn't hurt his bike, but it took about thirty minutes for him to start it. When I got home, the Lord really began to deal with me.

The next night I went back to work, and there was this fellow's bike. I said to myself, "I need to treat this fellow as if he were a dear friend and he had a need. Apparently his need is a mirror, because he has stolen mine." I went to the store and bought a mirror just like mine and put it on his bike. I also left a note. I said, "I know you stole my mirror. I'm the one who flooded your bike. But because of a relationship I have with Jesus Christ, he wouldn't tolerate that attitude in my life."

I left the mirror and note with my name and phone number on it. Later that night that fellow called me. He said, "I have stolen many things in my life, but I've never received this kind of reaction. Can we talk?" Last night, in my apartment, that guy got down on his knees and gave his life to Jesus!" **It was the Long-Expected Jesus . . . come to earth in the form of a thief!**

My friends, God leads us, as God led Jerry, into circumstances. God leads us into circumstances with our families, with our neighbors, with the people at work, and everywhere we go so that He can reveal Himself in the world through us! Now I realize that what I am suggesting is foolishness in the eyes of the world, but it's true, and it works.

As you and I think about the coming of Jesus at Christmas, though, we may as well confess that, for many of us, and for many reasons, the month or so between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day—Advent—is a time of great loneliness. This is particularly true for those of us who live alone, if for no other reason than that everyone else, it seems, has someone to share the holidays with.

In such moments it's pretty easy to get into a heavy game of "Poor Me," like Brenda did. Brenda was a red-headed, vivacious, never-hit-the-ground type of teenager. One night she came charging into her pastor's study, plopped herself down in a chair, cried a while, and then said, "Brother Oscar, I am so unhappy. Nobody loves me."

Her pastor replied, "Good grief, Brenda! I know your parents. I know they are busy with their new business, but they love you. I know your friends. They love you."

"No, they don't," she replied. "Nobody loves me. I could just die, and nobody cares."

Her pastor asked, "Brenda, let me ask you a question. Are you a Christian?"

She looked shocked and said, "Brother Oscar, you know I am a Christian."

He replied, "So who told you that someone was supposed to love you, anyway?"

"What do you mean," she asked.

Pastor Thompson continued, "In the economy of God, you have been created by Him as a channel for love to flow through you to others. The trouble is that you want the flow to go the wrong way. That's the reason why you're miserable and lonely. When the flow of love is going the right way, as God designed for it to be, you will not feel this way. YOU are supposed to do the loving. The person who always has to have the stream of love flowing inward is going to become a stagnant pool. Brenda, I believe you are stagnant.

"You go find some people out there and meet their needs. You don't have to feel great about them. You don't have to feel good about loving them. You don't have to have any feeling at all. You just make a commitment from your heart: 'Dear God, whatever people you put in my path, I'm going to meet their needs.' Now tomorrow I want you to make yourself

available to the Lord Jesus. I want you to get alone with Him. In the morning I want you to love somebody. Who is there who would be really difficult for you to love?"

Brenda immediately replied, "Judy."

"Who is Judy?"

"Judy is a freshman," Brenda said. "She is just dumb. She rides the bus with me, and she really bugs me."

"What's the problem?"

"I have to ride with her forty-five minutes every day. She crawls on the bus and it is 'chatter, chatter, chatter.' I don't want to listen to that freshman. She just latches onto me because I'm a senior."

Brother Oscar replied, with a wink, "Well, out of your immense senior wisdom, why don't you meet some of the needs of this lowly little freshman's ignorance?" They both laughed. "Assignment number one is for you to love Judy. That's my prescription. Now I've got to go to a meeting. I'll see you Sunday." Brenda came back on Sunday, and this was her story:

I got on the bus Thursday morning. No sooner had I sat down, than here came Judy. She sat right down beside me. I said, "Lord, I am going to meet her need if it kills me." The best thing I thought I could do was just to listen. So I turned to her, and for the first time I looked at her while she was talking to me. As I looked at her, I began to see a little face I had never noticed before. I realized that underneath all that chatter was a hurting little girl.

As we continued to talk, I asked, "Judy, tell me about your brothers and sisters and your Mom and Dad." She became very still and quiet and was silent for a long time. Finally, Judy said, "Brenda, my Mom and Dad are getting a divorce, and I am so scared. We're going to have to move, and my whole world is coming apart."

"Brother Oscar, in that moment I just listened. That's all I did, but I felt the love of God wanting to meet that little girl's needs through me. I put my arms around her, and we talked until we got to school. After we got off the bus, Judy put her books on the ground and put her arms around me, and she said, 'Oh, Brenda, I love you.'"

It was the Long-Expected Jesus . . . come to earth in the form of a frightened little girl.

My friend, are you dreading the loneliness of the Christmas season? Are you wanting somebody to love you? Maybe you can learn the same Secret of a Joyful Life that Brenda did. Do you have someone in the circles of your life who "bugs" you? It just may be that God is waiting to be a blessing to that person through you . . . and to bless you through them.

Every time that you or I begin to "cross swords" with someone, whether it's at work, at home, or wherever, it just may be that God has engineered circumstances between us and this person because He wants to come to us through them. It may be that God wants us to be the channel through whom His love can meet that person's need. We don't have to scratch very deeply to find people's hurts, and people need the Lord.

Now if you're drawing a blank on someone to care for, it might be good to check your "spiritual thermometer." If you and I are not continually bumping into people who have needs, we'd better be concerned. If we're not running into unlovely people, this may mean that God has not found us useable and available to be a channel of his love.

On the other hand, if God's love is flowing freely in us, there will be a "holy magnetism" about us that draws people to us, and God will draw people to Himself through us. It really doesn't get any better than that!

Are you still at a loss as to where to start? Why not begin with those who live in the same house with you? Are there any relationships that need mending? How about among your larger family, as with Jim and his dad? How about your neighbors? How about the people you work with, as with Jerry and his motorbike? How about those people who bug you, as with Brenda and Judy?

Deacons, how about those families on your ministry list? Sunday School teachers, how about the members of your class, their parents, or their children? Have these persons in the circles of your life been born again, or do they live this Christmas with a haunting search for an inner peace that continues to elude them; with guilt they cannot remove; with anger they cannot resolve; with shame that steals away joy?

My friends, we long for Christmas to happen, but so often we, like Brenda, long for it to happen to us. Can you see it? We've gotten it backward! Jesus has promised to each of us, as He promised to Martin Avdeich, "Look out into the street tomorrow, for I shall come!"

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free:
From our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.*

Come! Come! Lord Jesus!