

# WHAT TIME IS IT?

**Isaiah 2:2-4**  
**Romans 13:11-14**

*Advent is the time for the return of Christ.*

A sermon preached by  
Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
Fort Smith, Arkansas  
December 2, 2018

It's a simple question, isn't it? What time is it? Time for the sermon. Will we get out on time today? (Probably not.) A simple question, but the answer goes deep. What time is it?

If you visit my office, you might think I am obsessed with time. I have six clocks in my office, arranged so that wherever I am sitting, I can easily glance and see what time it is. I have time indicators on my office phone, my cell phone and my computer. Time is a precious commodity. Early in my ministry, I read books and attended seminars on time management, and those lessons I learned stayed with me.

Sometimes the questions of time take on a larger significance. In 1947, in response to the detonation of the first nuclear bombs, a group of nuclear scientists established the Doomsday Clock, a measurement of the likelihood of global nuclear disaster by war or accident. With midnight being the end of the world, the initial clock was set at 7 minutes to midnight. It has been set back as far as 17 minutes to midnight, and twice it has crept up to 11:58—two minutes to midnight: once in 1953, in the midst of the U. S. –Soviet nuclear arms race, and again in 2018, as fears of a new arms race and rogue nations having nuclear weapons loom large.<sup>1</sup> Then the question becomes, how much time do we have left?

Last week a collaboration of American scientists and government agencies issued the second volume of a report on global climate change. Coupled with an international UN report in October, it details the expected results of climate change: deterioration of crops, marine life, and air quality, more catastrophic weather events and wildfires, loss of coastlands, increases in pulmonary diseases. It's not a fun read. And the vast majority of scientists say that the timeline for avoiding the worst effects of climate change is short—as little as a dozen years. It's more than a little scary to think about how close to the edge of destruction we might be. What time is it for the planet God has given us to take care of? I believe the correct answer would not be, “time to ignore and deny.”

Knowing what time it is has been important since Bible times. Jesus once said to a crowd of listeners, *“When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”*<sup>2</sup> What time is it?

People of faith have always had an odd sense of what time it is. We live in two times—the “now” and the “not yet.” There is always a sense that we live “between the times.” We try to be aware of what God is doing in the present time, but we are also aware that God is not through with us. God’s story is not over. There is always a “not yet,” a future hope, that helps us deal with today.

The season of Advent, which starts today, always carries with it this dual sense of time—the “now” and the “not yet.” There are really two Advents that we should talk about during this season. The first and more familiar is the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. Advent is a time to prepare our hearts again for the coming of the Christ child in Bethlehem. Every year we sing the songs and read the Scriptures and watch the children act out the story, and it’s a good time. If we can get past the cultural commercial celebration of Christmas, it’s a deeply spiritual time. We will talk more about that Advent in a minute.

The other Advent is the second Advent of Christ—the second coming of Christ, the return of Jesus to establish his Kingdom. The New Testament Greek word is *“Parousia.”* This is the “not yet” Advent. The writers of the New Testament are consistent in their belief that Jesus would return soon to destroy evil and establish the Reign of God forever.

In Acts, as Jesus is ascending into heaven following the resurrection, two men in white robes appeared and said to the disciples, *“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*<sup>3</sup> In Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians,

he describes how *“the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive (Paul expected to be there!), who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”* Then he says, *“encourage one another with these words.”*<sup>4</sup>

The Book of Revelation begins, *“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place ...Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.”*<sup>5</sup>

Even Jesus is quoted as saying, *“Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”*<sup>6</sup>

The only problem is, it didn’t happen as the New Testament writers expected. Here we are, 2,000 years later. So how do we understand this idea of the second Advent? For centuries, so-called Bible scholars have tried to figure out God’s timetable for the return of Christ. They’ve all been wrong. Jesus also said, *“about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”*<sup>7</sup> So we rely on the faith of the Church from the earliest creeds until now, that somehow, sometime, Christ will return and God will defeat evil, sin, and death forever. Our job is to keep awake, stay alert, and know what time it is.

Sometimes I have this fantasy, as I drive down the road or I step outside, and I see a glorious array of clouds, with the sunlight streaming through them. To me it just looks like heaven. And I wonder, What if? What if Jesus came bursting through that cloud, and it happened today just like the Bible said? What if God just surprised the world and came back and destroyed evil and established a new heaven and earth just like the Book says?

Well, it hasn't happened yet. If the thought of that happening makes you feel a little queasy or anxious or fearful, maybe you need to think about why it makes you feel that way, and perhaps do whatever you need to do to turn that feeling into joy and eagerness.

Personally, I think the second coming of Christ happens all the time. The risen Christ returns whenever we act in love, whenever we extend grace and forgiveness, whenever we help someone who needs it. Jesus is here when we act like Jesus. These Christ-like actions are the hope of the world. This is when Advent happens.

John McCain, the war hero and Senator who died in August, was asked by *Time* magazine during the Presidential campaign of 2008 to share his "personal journey of faith." McCain spent several Advents and Christmases as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, and he shared this story out of his personal experience.

Often his captors would tie McCain's arms behind his back, loop the rope around his neck and ankles and pull his head down between his knees and leave him that way, in intense pain, overnight. One night, a guard came into his cell and signaled McCain to be quiet. Then he loosened John's ropes to relieve his pain. The next morning, before his shift ended, the guard came back in and tightened the ropes so the other guards wouldn't know.

A month or so later, on Christmas Day, McCain was standing in the dirt courtyard when he was approached by the same guard. Without a word, without even making eye contact, the guard stood beside McCain. But with his sandaled foot, the guard drew a cross in the dirt. McCain wrote, "We stood wordlessly looking at the cross, remembering the true light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a Vietnamese prison camp."<sup>8</sup>

The message of the second Advent is that even in the worst of situations, Christ can come and bring hope. God can be present and make a difference in our suffering. That's what time it is.

The more familiar Advent is the first Advent, as we prepare to welcome the baby Jesus to the manger in Bethlehem. It is an important time to tell the story again, to remember that one of the names of the

child is Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”<sup>9</sup> It’s time to celebrate and reflect on the meaning of the Incarnation, that “God became flesh and dwelt among us.”<sup>10</sup>

The text from Romans 13 is not about the Christmas story, but it really fits in with the themes of Advent: “*you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.*”<sup>11</sup> In context, Paul is talking about his expectation of the imminent return of Christ, but we can also say that about the expectation of the Incarnation—salvation is at hand; the day is near; it’s time to wake up and be ready to receive the King! Our response in both scenarios, first or second Advent, is to “*lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*” Paul says, “*Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*”<sup>12</sup>

On the surface, this just seems like another moral admonition to stop doing bad stuff, straighten up, and fly right. But when you look at life from an Advent perspective, when you, one, celebrate that Jesus has come, and two, anticipate that Christ will come again, then Christian morality is the natural consequence of our faith. When we really know what time it is, this Advent perspective changes everything—the things we value, the way we see the world, the way we act, and the way we relate to God.

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, wrote,

If Jesus didn't come, the story of Christmas is one more moral paradigm to crush you. If Jesus didn't come, I wouldn't want to be anywhere around these Christmas stories that say we need to be sacrificing, we need to be humble, we need to be loving. All that will do is crush you into the ground ...

[But] if Jesus Christ is actually God come in the flesh, you're going to know much more about God ... If Jesus is who he says he is, we have a 500-page autobiography from God, in a sense. And our understanding will be vastly more personal and specific than any philosophy or religion could give us. [Because of Christmas] look at what God has done to get you to know him personally. If the Son would come all this way to become a real person to you, don't you think the Holy Spirit will do anything in his power to make Jesus a real person to you in your heart? Christmas is an invitation by God: Look what I've done to come near to you. Now draw near to Me. I don't want to be a concept; I want to be a friend.<sup>13</sup>

What time is it? It's Advent. Our time is now. Our time is not yet. We celebrate that salvation has come near in the Incarnation of the Son of God in a little baby born in Bethlehem. We anticipate that God is not done with us yet. One day God's Kingdom will come in full, and we will be a part of it. Between the times, we are all about watching and waiting and getting ready and rejecting the darkness and living in the light.

As you come to the Table today, hear this Advent invitation from God: "Look what I've done to come near to you. Now draw near to me. I don't want to be a concept; I want to be a friend." Thanks be to God.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doomsday\\_Clock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doomsday_Clock).

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:54-56.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:11.

<sup>4</sup> I Thessalonians 4:15-18.

<sup>5</sup> Revelations 1:1,7.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 13:30.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 13:32f.

<sup>8</sup> John McCain, "A Light amid the Darkness," *Time* magazine (8-18-08), p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 1:23.

---

<sup>10</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 13:11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 13:13-14.

<sup>13</sup>Tim Keller, "Why Christmas Matters," *Relevant Magazine* (12-10-11).