

“What Will Jesus Find? Gentleness”

Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7

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What will Jesus find when He returns? That’s a critical question for our faith today, because we live in an uncertain, turbulent world, and the hope of Jesus’ return transforms how we live in this world. If Jesus is not coming back — and let’s face it, most people live assuming He’s not — then things will just go on pretty much like they are. If Jesus is not coming back, it doesn’t mean we’re completely without hope — surely science and technology will advance, and maybe humanity will grow up a bit. But there’s not really any direction to history, and we’re not really going anywhere in particular other than where we take ourselves. If Jesus isn’t coming back, we celebrate Christmas as a time for nice feelings and happy get-togethers without any real power; every year we think warm thoughts and then forget about them until next year.

But if Jesus is coming back, Christmas takes on a whole new meaning. It’s not just a remembrance of things past, as pleasant and celebration-worthy as they may be, it’s also an anticipation of what’s yet to come. Jesus came once to inaugurate His kingdom, and He can and will return to bring it in its fullness. We celebrate with a concrete hope, with a real confidence, with an enduring trust in our God who has been faithful before and will remain faithful through the ages. So, what will Jesus find when He returns? Will He find people living as though they expect Him to return, celebrating Christmas with the powerful expectation of Lord who will return, or will He find people living their lives the same as always, celebrating Christmas as just another nice, bland, powerless holiday that doesn’t really make a difference? Where is the power of Christmas? Is it in vaguely-defined feelings of togetherness and giving and peppermint and ugly sweaters, or is it in the arrival of a Lord who is mighty to save, who will come again?

We’re in the season of Advent, when we heighten that sense of expectation. We don’t just prepare by putting decorations on our houses and baking cookies for our parties, we also prepare our lives. This year we’re spending less time on the Christmas story and more time on the coming again story, by looking through the writings of the first Christians and realizing that the expectation of Jesus’ return was simply assumed in their faith, and mentions of His return pepper their books. What were they hoping Jesus would find in them when He returned?

Today our text is in Philippians 4, and particularly in verse 5, when Paul says that “the Lord is near.” The consistent message of the church is that Jesus *will* return, and though we don’t always agree on the details and we don’t know when, we do know that it will be soon. Paul gives us a number of instructions in this closing section of his letter, but there’s one in particular that catches my attention: “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” What’s the connection between those two statements? There’s no grammatical connection between them, but surely Paul wasn’t just spouting off random things. Maybe you’ve seen bumper stickers saying, “Jesus is coming back...look busy!” That makes more sense, because if the boss is coming back, you want Him to find you hard at work. But “let your gentleness be evident to all”? Why would Jesus want to find gentleness among His people when He returns?

It might be helpful first to understand what gentleness means. It’s one of those words that we often use without taking the time to define; I suspect we all have an image of gentleness in mind but

might have a hard time defining what it actually is. The word that our Bibles have translated as “gentleness” is not a very common word in the New Testament, but it does get used a few times, and some of those uses give us more of a clue. The most basic thing we can say about gentleness is that it’s the opposite of violence. In 1 Timothy 3, there’s a list of characteristics for leaders in the church, and one of them is that they should be “not violent but gentle.” Or in 1 Peter 2, when Peter is dealing with relationships between Christians and non-Christians, he says that Christian slaves should submit to their masters, “not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.” The contrast is between gentleness and harshness, or maybe between masters who are fair and masters who are dishonest and crooked. In James 3, it’s contrasted with things like envy and selfish ambition, and it’s listed among such qualities of godly wisdom as purity, peace, submission, mercy, and sincerity.

Aristotle actually discussed this gentleness in his exploration of ethics, though he used it a bit differently. He was writing about the concept of justice, and he compared this word that we translate as gentleness with justice. In that context, gentleness might not be the best translation; we might go with “equity” instead. What Aristotle argued was that the law is simply insufficient to cover every conceivable situation, and there are times when it’s appropriate to set aside the definition of justice according to the letter of the law in favor of this gentleness or equity. Or, to put it in better terms for our discussion today, sometimes it’s better for everyone if I don’t always insist on getting my just desserts. Sometimes it’s appropriate for me to set aside some of my rights recognizing that doing so may benefit others. So the gentleness we’re called to is not just not being violent, and it’s not being passive or weak or even just nice, it’s a willingness to not be a bully or a loudmouth even when I might have the right to be. It means living gently in our society, not always yelling about what I deserve and what I want and what will be best for me.

But here’s the thing: in a world where our candidates for president seem to be competing for the most extreme policy, what good is gentleness? In a world where a terrorist state literally lines up our brothers and sisters in Christ and beheads them, and then boasts about it, what good is gentleness? In a world where everyone around us is fighting tooth and nail to get and keep what’s owed them, what good is gentleness? In a world where arrogance and brashness are called ambition and are rewarded with fame, prestige, and wealth, what good is gentleness? In a world where I certainly cannot be sure that anyone else is looking out for my rights, and there are countless people who will take advantage of me if I’m not watching, what good is gentleness? What good is it for me to renounce my claim to be a bully when it seems like bullies are everywhere, and they seem to get ahead?

The thing the bullies always forget is that their bullying and braggadocio is always a sign of their weakness. They may have weapons and the will to use them and influence over people’s lives, but they do not have the strength or the assurance to be gentle. Because you see, you can only be gentle when you don’t have to use strength. I picture a scene from countless kung-fu movies, when the wise old sensei faces down the arrogant bad guy, and the bad guy brags and boasts and postures in front of the serene, composed sensei. The sensei has no need to show off, because he knows what he’s capable of. You can only be gentle when you can afford to. You can only be generous when you have the assurance that there is enough. When ISIS runs out of bullets, Allah will not come to their aid. When the strength and intelligence of a human come to an end, what then does that person rely on? What good is a loud mouth when you can’t back it up?

What does Paul say in our passage for today? “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” And if we were to continue reading: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Gentleness is connected to the return of Christ, because you can afford to be gentle if you know that your Lord is almighty and He is returning. You don't have to be anxious about anything; instead, you can present your concerns to your Lord who is near. The practice of gentleness is an outflow of our trust in the faithfulness and power of our God. Loudmouths are loud to cover over their insecurity; gentle people don't have to shout to get what they want because they know they are secure in their God. Paul may have been writing to Christians facing persecution and suspicion, Christians who may have been tempted to fight back or shout to be heard in their society. His message is just as relevant today, in a world filled with noise, where everyone shouts to make sure they get theirs. Let your gentleness be evident, because the Lord is near.

But, we might then ask, what happens if the world tramples us? What happens if we get bullied and shoved around and laughed at and taken advantage of? Well, what happened to Jesus? Earlier in Philippians, Paul quotes an ancient hymn of the church, one that we've read many times before: though Jesus is in very nature God, He “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.” Instead, “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!” He was gentle, and the world trampled Him. So what happened? “Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name.”

The gentleness of Christmas was a demonstration of the power of God. It was the quiet, unassuming arrival of a God who knew that He had come to transform our world. It was a silent night because the world was holding its breath in anticipation of what God was going to do. He didn't need to come in glory and power. He didn't need to come to threaten and impress us, because He didn't have anything to prove. Instead, He emptied Himself of all but love, because what we needed to see was His faithfulness, His ability to save us.

The Lord is near. Will He find that gentleness in you when He returns? Often Christians will object by saying that gentleness is nice in theory, but in reality it's just not effective. We have to compromise sometimes in order to get things done, to advance God's agenda, to hold tight to our rights, and make sure the world takes us seriously. But that's the wrong focus: by saying that Jesus Christ is Lord and that He will return soon, we're saying that history is His to move forward, and salvation belongs to Him. We can't save the world; we can't even save ourselves. Instead, we rely on His faithfulness, leaving us with no reason to be anything but gentle. So the question then becomes, not which sort of behavior leaves a bigger impact on history, but which sort of behavior brings us closer to God, better demonstrates trust in God, and better witnesses to the coming of the kingdom of God? Again, our focus is not on how we get the most out of life, it's on how God gets all of us.

The alternative is not great. The famous poem by Dylan Thomas begins, “Do not go gentle into that good night, old age should burn and rave at close of day; rage, rage against the dying of the light.” The poem is about death, about facing the inevitability of death, but still refusing to give in quietly. Don’t go gently; rage against it even though it’s futile, because what else is there? You’ve got no hope beyond death, so the best you can do is to rage against the darkness and show it that you’re not going down without a fight. Don’t go gently, because that’s just giving up. It’s bleakness and hopelessness put in a wrapper that appears to be heroic, but it’s really just futile. No reason to be gentle without a faithful God.

The world needs to see a church that trusts God so deeply as to be willing to say, “I will be gentle with you, and I will be gentle for you, because my God has been good to me. I will set aside my rights for you. I will not always insist on getting my fair share of the pie, for the sake of others. I will not always insist on having the last word, or keeping score, or making my opinion known, because what matters is that Christ is near, and so we have hope.” This is the hope of Christmas. This is the gentleness of Christmas that is loaded with God’s power. What will Jesus find in your life when He returns?



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