

“Come, Lord Jesus”

Reading: Revelation 19:1-16, 22:12-21

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

If you were with us last Sunday, we began to say some of our last words to you by saying words we've said many times before. We want to leave you with what we think are some of the most important things we've had to say to you in the last ten years, and we've chosen the song “The Spirit and the Bride” by Matt Maher as our refrain because it sings those ideas so well. Last Sunday the message was that everyone is invited to come, that no matter their situation or their sins, no matter how far they've run or how close they've been, we as a church have a voice so that we can join with the Spirit of God in inviting them to come and have a place in God's family. All of our theology and liturgy and study and worship and stories land there, because that's where the entire Bible lands. After the whole thousand-year-long story of God's work with His people, the book of Revelation closes with that invitation, and that's what we're here to do.

But that's not the only invitation we use our voices for. We also join in with the age-old cry of the church: “Come, Lord Jesus.” Almost the very last words in John's Revelation, and the refrain that echoes through all the ages of the church since then, is that cry of hope and expectation that Jesus will return to complete His work and make all things right. We cannot be the church if we don't invite those who are far from God to come, and we likewise cannot be the church if we don't hope for and expect and make ourselves ready for the return of Jesus. We can't be the church if we don't believe in His faithfulness to that degree. We are a people who are waiting, and the fact that we are waiting for Jesus to return shapes who we are.

John begins his Revelation by saying, “Blessed are the ones who hear this prophecy and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” Jesus is coming soon, and taking that to heart changes you. If you've read Revelation with us in the past, you'll remember that the first part of the book is made of up letters to churches in which Jesus tells them how to live while they wait for His imminent return. Each one of these churches faces the threat of persecution from outside and the threat of faithlessness inside. There's a theme in those letters. Seven churches in seven different situations, all in different places, spiritually speaking. Some are doing better than others, but they are all facing a trial of some sort, and the message to each one is to repent. Repent from the evil things and hold fast to the good faith of Christ. The circumstances and the struggles are different, but the instructions are basically the same. And there is no question about whether they are suffering: in chapter 6, as the vision progresses, we hear the voice of those martyred for their faith cry out from under the altar in heaven, asking, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” There is anticipation here, not because they're impatient but because they are enduring the sort of trials that prove that God's kingdom has not yet fully arrived. Their cry has been the cry of Christ's church ever since, and we wait, living in between Jesus' birth and His return. We wait faithfully while we trust in God's faithfulness.

And so while we are waiting on the arrival of our Messiah, while we are suffering and wondering and crying out to God, there is this persistent command from our Lord to be faithful. We're in different times and different circumstances, and the details of His call to us might have variations, but the basic message of faithfulness to our first love remains. Those who are victorious, who follow the call to repent and hold fast, are given a variety of promises in those letters of entering

into the presence of Christ and participating in His victorious work. He promises to make them a pillar in the temple of God, to give them a seat with Him on His throne, to dress them in the garments of purity and righteousness, to give them heavenly food, and so on, with images of living in the intimate eternal presence of Christ in His glory.

And so this vision of the return of Jesus begins with the call to God's people to continue waiting, which was also true of the time before Jesus was born. God's people had promises, and they trusted God, so they waited for their Messiah. But in God's kingdom, waiting is never *just* waiting. Persevering and holding fast to the faith is not simply waiting. They waited, and we wait. But they did not only wait, and neither do we, because even when God does not appear to be moving and we seem to be waiting a long time, God does not waste time. We do not cause the arrival of the Messiah through our actions, but our small acts of repentance and faithfulness do work to make the soil receptive to the seed of His kingdom. Our persistent claim that Christ will return, and our insistence on living in His kingdom in the meantime, is a powerful witness to the world. Faith is not opposed to evidence, but our demonstration of our patience while we wait shows our continued trust that God will be faithful to His promises.

And at the same time, our faithful waiting does a work in us. God does not waste time; He calls us to use this time for repentance and healing and learning and loving. Christ's tarrying is an invitation to use the time to grow closer to Him by practicing the disciplines of our faith. As He promised to the churches mentioned in Revelation, waiting faithfully leads us to the presence of Christ. Listening to the voice in the wilderness leads to the comfort. Repentance ushers us into the kingdom. That discipline of learning to wait for God, of struggling with our questions and doubts, of hearing His voice and listening in the times of His silence, of sifting God's truth from the world's lies, of humbling ourselves in our failures and casting ourselves upon Him, this is all part of the character of God's people in their seasons of waiting.

But the return of Jesus doesn't just impact our own spirituality, it affects how we relate to the rest of the world. There are so many things in our world and in our lives that receive so much more fanfare than the arrival of the Messiah. The launch of a new model of iPhone generates far more buzz than the birth of Jesus did, and raises more expectations than His return. We get out the trumpets to announce all sorts of new toys and gadgets and movies and experiences. Or maybe it's a new relationship that will change your life and "save" you. Or whatever political party or candidate you support; they're the one who can make everything right, or we're going to fight a war to save the world, or here's our new program that will fix it all. How many little "messiahs" arrive in various forms that generate so much more excitement than the arrival of the true Messiah did? How many false messiahs do we anticipate and prepare for and plan for more than we do the only Messiah that really matters?

I ask because it was a relevant question at the birth of Jesus and for His return. The true Messiah arrives in the midst of any number of pretenders to His throne, and our task is to maintain our loyalty and our focus on the true one. We read from Revelation 19, which is the part of that story in which the Messiah arrives in a grand victory procession and battle to overthrow His foes. It's a chapter that it's easy to get excited about, because at long last, God's people get to have their vengeance against their persecutors as we follow the glorious Christ in battle. But wait, no, we have to look carefully at what John tells us. Here's what we see if we were to continue the reading in verse

19: "Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."

God's people do indeed follow their Lord in a great army, but the only one doing the fighting in Jesus, the rider on the white horse, and even He doesn't do much fighting. He simply and completely overcomes His enemies with the sword of His word. So again, our role is only to follow Him. We want to take up arms against God's enemies, but that's not what we're called to do.

Instead, the more significant message for us comes *before* the arrival of this mighty Messiah. Earlier in Revelation John tells us about a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet, giving birth to the Messiah in a dramatic retelling of our nativity story. If you continue reading the chapters that follow, you see evil offer its own perverse parody of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She's dressed in splendid attire that is only a pale imitation of Mary's radiant clothing, and instead of being pursued by a dragon, she rides a blasphemous beast. She carries with her all sorts of abominable things and tempts all nations of the earth to drink from her cup of filth. Her name is Babylon, and she offers all sorts of pomp and glitter and hope of salvation from all kinds of sources, none of which are the true Messiah. In short, she is the mother of false little messiahs, things to get excited about and hope for that will ultimately let you down.

The world that is in rebellion against God wants nothing more than to provide a convincing alternative to God. John the Revelator calls this Babylon. John shows us that the coming of the true Messiah involves the systematic de-construction and judgment of Babylon. These false messiahs must be cleared out and rejected to make room for the Second Coming of Jesus. And so in the chapters leading up to our glorious arrival of the triumphant Christ, we watch as Babylon with her temptations is destroyed, overthrown, cast into the depths. Her ruin brings great lament from many people, from the kings and rulers, from the merchants who made money off of her, from the sailors who traded in her goods. She brought all kinds of fine luxuries to the ends of the earth, from food to clothes to building materials to trinkets, and, oh yes, slaves as well. Her glory is built on injustice. She seems beautiful and rich, but you don't have to look closely to see how offensive she is.

The birth of Jesus takes place in the context of Babylon's authority, when Caesar ruled the world, while the Second Coming of Jesus takes place in the context of Babylon's overthrow. In both cases there is a conflict and a contrast between the Messiah of the kingdom of God and the alternative messiahs of the kingdoms of Babylon. There can be no accommodation made when those alternative messiahs try to steal some of the fanfare of our true Messiah. This is the constant challenge of the church that waits: to remember that it is Christ, and only Christ, who is our Messiah, and we must reject as false any alternatives. His coming is a threat to all of the Babylons of this world, because He reveals their shabbiness and their injustices for what they are, and He has promised to tear them down and build His eternal kingdom in their place.

In His first arrival, He delivered us from our slavery to sin and opened to us the opportunity of adoption into God's family. In His second arrival, He will banish forever sin and evil, and He will

establish a city of redeemed people who bear His name and live in His light forever. There will be no place for the shabby imitations offered by Babylon. And so we are in the awkward position of preparing the way and then following Christ's lead. It's hard to know, sometimes, where the line is when dealing with the Babylons of this world. We're not expected to withdraw from them completely, because we are called into the world in mission. We need to prepare the way with our lives. And so we challenge those false messiahs with our mission and our witness, and then we follow our Lord in His work of redemption. Jesus is coming back, and that means that our actions have meaning in this world. It also means that the actions of the world toward us have no power in the end, and suffering can be redeemed.

And so we join our voices with the church through the ages in inviting Jesus to come quickly. He is our hope, and He will not fail. And because we hope, we can repent from evil and do good, and we can make a difference in challenging all the meaningless Babylons of the world.



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