

Faith on Fire Preaching Series

2 Timothy 1:7-12

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. [2 Timothy 1:7-12]

OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray.

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*¹

GREETINGS

Good morning. My name is Lonnie Lacy and as you can probably tell, I come from a land far south of here: a land flowing with fried chicken and sweet tea; a place where it is presently a frigid 75 degrees; a community where everybody says “y’all,” and “yes ma’am,” and “bless your heart.” The moment I stepped off the plane at LaGuardia I immediately felt like the apostle Peter on that fateful night of our Lord’s arrest when all those people looked at him and said, “We know who you are, for your accent gives you away!”²

Nonetheless, I am so happy to be here with all of you as part of the decennial celebration of Faith on Fire. I am grateful to Dick and to Fleming for the invitation and hospitality, and I bring you all warm greetings from your brothers and sisters at St. Anne’s Episcopal Church in Tifton, Georgia.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*. 212.

² Matthew 26:73

INTRODUCTION

What I want to talk about today is something that most people—including most Christians—really *never* talk about. It is the theological skeleton in our closet. The black sheep of all our doctrine. The pair of brown shoes on the otherwise sleek and respectable tuxedo of our Christian faith. I am talking about none other than the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To get there, though, I want to begin and end with an anchoring piece from this stalwart passage we just heard. Listen again to what the Apostle Paul says to his young friend Timothy. He says, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”³

Doesn’t that sound good? I don’t know about you, but these days I could really go for a little less fear. I would do well to feel less powerlessness, more love, and—above all—a sound mind free of worry, anxiety, and fear about the future unknown. Yet, is it not the case that everything around us—*everything!*—is so pointedly, powerfully, determinedly focused toward our basest fears? Our politics. Our discourse. Our economics. Even so much of what we pass off as our religion. All of it keeps boiling us up, shaming us down, and growling from within our bowels and from under our beds, “Be afraid. Be very afraid.” That kind of fear comes from a greater power, and that power has a name. It is called Sin, and it is all in us and all around us.

So how is it that our blessed friend, the Apostle Paul—in what was likely his last letter just weeks before his execution—was able to say with a straight face that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind? Clearly it had much to do with his profound understanding of the grace begun and given in our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. But if you look at that last verse, you’ll see something else: a glimmer of hope in something yet to come, unfinished business in God’s cosmic project of grace. “I know whom I have believed,” he says, “and am persuaded that he is able to keep what I have committed to him until that Day.” And what day would that be? The Great Day of the coming of our Lord.

OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SECOND COMING

Where I grew up, the Second Coming is the type of thing you either talk about all the time, or you never talk about at all. There is no in between. And for some strange reason in the South, all this theology—both our assertion of it and our embarrassment by it—seems to find its best expression on the highways and byways. When driving across south Georgia, it is not unusual to see a bumper sticker declaring, “Jesus Is Coming!” (Never underestimate the prophetic power of a Toyota Carolla.) But go five miles more, and you’ll see a more sarcastic version that jabs back, “Jesus Is Coming: Quick, Look Busy!” or “Jesus Is Coming, and Boy Is He Mad!” Or in a grocery store parking lot, one vehicle will be emblazoned with the words, “In Case of Rapture, This Car Will Be Unmanned,” while another avows flippantly, “If You Get Raptured, I’m Stealing Your Car.”

³ 2 Tim. 1:7

And of course, where would we be without billboards like this in which our Lord and Savior dons a cheap costume from Wal-Mart, stands in the throes of Armageddon, and reminds us all to visit his website i-will-be-back.org? (This is real, by the way. It's on I-75 on the way to Atlanta.)



We have a word for this in the South. You might call it gauche or tasteless, but we call it just plain tacky. As my nine-year-old daughter would say, “Daddy, it’s just a bit too much.”

That is how we mainline Protestants seem to view the Second Coming. While some of our brothers and sisters are shouting it from the rooftops, the rest of us suffer from a sort of embarrassment over it all. It seems so primitive, and they sound so crazy. So we laugh it off; we turn their punch into a punch-line; and we go on about our reasonable days in reasonable ways, all the while still consumed with the problem of Sin and fear with no obvious hope for a better future.

It wasn’t until I became an Episcopal priest that I began to realize what a gorgeous, robust, sturdy theology we hold of the Second Coming. It wasn’t until I began to *really* say the words of our prayerbook, to *truly* sing the lyrics to our hymns, that I began to know the full-throated power of what we’ve all been saying all these years:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.⁴

We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. We await his coming in glory.⁵

Lo! he comes, with clouds descending, / once for our salvation slain; / thousand thousand saints attending / swell the triumph of his train: / Alleluia! alleluia! / Christ the Lord returns to reign.⁶

⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer*. 363.

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*. 368.

But perhaps my favorite is that obscure little line in the Eucharist, the proper preface that gets trotted out only during the four short weeks of Advent:

You sent your beloved Son to redeem us from sin and death, and to make us heirs in him of everlasting life; that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.⁷

There it is again: the promise of something more than shame or fear in the face of Christ's impending return. Folks, this is not vapid, pious pie-in-the-sky. This is the culmination of grace, the consummation of heaven and earth. It is Hope with a capital H.

If we believe that he is the Son of God; that he was born as they say he was born; that he died as they say he died; that he rose as they say he rose: then why would we not take him at his word when he says, "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and 'coming with the clouds of heaven'"?⁸ How can we not be downright "soul-possessed" by the promise and possibility of our Lord's imminent return?

ABOUT THAT DAY NO ONE KNOWS

Part of our problem is that we do not know when it will happen, which has the effect of making it feel more like fairy tale or wishful thinking. The author of the letter to the Hebrews describes our situation as though Jesus has gone for a time into the Holy of Holies, and we, like the Jews of old, are waiting for the High Priest to return from behind the veil.⁹ The only difference is that the Jews only had to wait one day a year. We, on the other hand, have been waiting for two millennia.

It is tempting, then, to try to figure it all out: to stamp it with a date and time. God knows there are plenty of preachers on TV who continue to think they're on the verge of having it all figured out. There's one televangelist couple I know of who have been saying, "Any day now," for at least 20 years. Meanwhile I've noticed they now seem to be getting regular facelifts and Botox injections, presumably to keep the message fresh.

In college I had a summer job in a department store where I worked with a woman who seemed absolutely certain she had it all pinned down. She would preach in the middle of the store to anyone who would listen (this is something that happens in south Georgia), and you never knew—whether standing near the men's neckties or the Jockey underwear display—when she might pull out this big chart of the end times. It was like the one below, but with actual dates on it. One day she put it in front of me and, with a breathless twinkle in her eye, asked, "So what do you think?" All I could muster was, "You know, I think I've heard somewhere that 'faith is the assurance of things *hoped* for, the conviction of things *not* seen.'"¹⁰ She was not impressed.

⁶ Wesley, Charles. *Hymnal 1982*. #57

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*. 378.

⁸ Mark 14:62

⁹ Hebrews 6:19-20

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:1

There may be something to the idea that the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ is made manifest in everyday acts of grace, but the painful, burdensome truth is that Sin is real, and our acts of kindness will not be enough to right the world fully and completely. As the old collect in the prayerbook says, “We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.”¹³ We need a Savior . . . one who will finish the work already begun on our behalf.

To return to Lewis again:

The doctrine of the Second Coming is deeply uncongenial to the whole evolutionary or developmental character of modern thought. We have been taught to think of the world as something that grows slowly towards perfection, something that ‘progresses’ or ‘evolves.’ Christian Apocalyptic offers us no such hope. It does not even foretell . . . a gradual decay. It foretells a sudden, violent end imposed from without; an extinguisher popped onto the candle, a brick flung at the gramophone, a curtain rung down on the play—‘Halt!’¹⁴

You see, having a full and robust theology of the Second Coming inoculates us against the sentimentality and the self-idolatrous belief that says, “We can fix this. Just give us time, O Lord, and we can make this better than you can.” We are entangled in Sin, and there’s only One who can undo this Gordian knot. Whether we want to believe it or not, we need Judgment. We need to be shown the mirror of who we truly are, and the last time that happened for us, it ended up looking like a man hanging on a tree, bleeding for us as both our victim and our king.

WHEN OUR IDOLS DISSOLVE IN OUR HANDS

Much has been written, both in Scripture and in the commentaries, about “the great and terrible Day of the Lord,”¹⁵ when all that we know will come apart at the hinges and the false coverings will be rolled away to lay all things bare. Peter puts it fiercely when he says, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”¹⁶

That may sound far too fearsome or fantastic, an occasion for weeping and gnashing of teeth, but there’s a promise embedded in there, a jewel of great hope if you’ll see it. On that Day, all that we cling to in the place of God—all the idols we hold so closely to our chest, including the most selfish parts of our very selves and psyches—will all fall away. They will dissolve like ashes and sand between the slits of our fingers, and before we know it we will stand naked before the Throne with nothing to offer but our true and meager selves. For some, that is the stuff of nightmares, a great and terrible loss, but for the child of God, it

¹³ *The Book of Common Prayer*. 218.

¹⁴ Lewis, C.S. “The World’s Last Night.” *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1960. 100-101.

¹⁵ Joel 2:31

¹⁶ 2 Peter 3:10

should have the ring of utter freedom. The only way for a new Jerusalem, for a new heaven and a new earth, “for the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,”¹⁷ is for all that is false in us and around us—all that captures and captivates us—to fall away . . . to dissolve as with fire, that the truth of our selves be finally, fully disclosed.

And that brings us to Paul’s threefold promise of the kind of spirit God has given us: the spirit of power, love, and a sound mind.

POWER: BOLDNESS BEFORE THE THRONE

For the Apostle Paul and for you, me, and all the saints of God who have clung to the cross of Christ, our only power is the power of his mercy. As Paul says to the Romans, “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”¹⁸

When I think on that great and terrible Day when all the elements and all my idols will be dissolved and disclosed, somehow my mind typically goes to Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, rendered on the altar wall in the Sistine Chapel. There, a bulky, otherworldly Christ stands with his arm outstretched as angels pull the righteous up and shove the sinful down.

Notice the characters in play. Near our radiant Christ, you see the Blessed Virgin Mary, the apostles, and the saints in Light. To his lower right are the souls of the just, emerging from their long sleep in the depths of their graves, being pulled toward the heavens.



¹⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*. 96.

¹⁸ Romans 1:16



To his lower left are the souls of the damned, tumbling to the Abyss where Charon stands ready to ferry them to Hades. Look just above Charon, and you see the disfigured horror of one who has come to be called the “Damned Man,” painfully aware of his destiny as the demons begin to devour his flesh in midflight.

And yet, it seems Michelangelo knew a deeper truth. Look at the figure of St. Bartholomew, kneeling at our Lord’s left knee, identifiable by the fact that he holds his own skin, which legend says was flayed from his body on the day of his martyrdom. Art historians have suggested that the face on Bartholomew’s old skin is none other than that of Michelangelo himself. Why would the artist have granted his own visage to such a grotesque and peculiar placement? Perhaps it is because Michelangelo was after a more nuanced and hopeful truth: that each of us hang somewhere in the balance between the “Damned Man” and the Risen Christ. If we are not to be discarded, dropped lifelessly into the boat of Charon, it will be only by the grace of Christ himself and the glory of the cross.

Something of that truth is to be found in hymn #337, pure gold but rarely sung. In the second stanza it says, “Look Father, look on his anointed face, / and only look on us as found in him; / look not on our misusings of thy grace, / our prayer so languid, and our faith so dim: / for lo! Between our sins and their reward, / we set the passion of thy Son our Lord.”¹⁹

What bald-faced boldness! As my friend the Rev. Kevin Kelly is fond of saying, “On the Last Day, when I stand before the throne of God to give my account, all I’ll really be able to do is to plead the Father to look upon the Son and *dare* him to judge me by any other means.” Maybe that sounds like a bait-and-switch, a feeble attempt to pull the wool over the Father’s all-knowing eye on the Great Day of Judgment, but I have a suspicion that this has actually been the Father’s plan all along.

That, my friends, is the power, and the power is a mercy.

¹⁹ Monk, William Henry. *Hymnal 1982*. #337

LOVE: THE CONSUMMATION OF ALL THINGS

There is a reason why Christ spoke of his return in terms of brides and bridegrooms. There's a reason why John of Patmos "saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."²⁰ There is a reason why the Church has long spoken of the Second Coming as the "consummation" of all things in heaven and on earth.

To quote the great James Taylor:

There is a feeling like the clenching of a fist;
There is a hunger in the center of the chest;
There is a passage through the darkness and the mist;
And though the body sleeps the heart will never rest.²¹

Or as the more classical option, St. Augustine, once put it:

Thou hast formed us for thyself, O Lord,
and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.²²

We were made for one thing, and one thing only: to know our Creator and to live in love with him for all eternity. It is not just our Judge who is nigh; it is the Lover of our souls.

SOUND MIND: SOUL-POSSESSED BY HOPE

I will close with a final story as I take up the last of Paul's promises: that of a sound mind.

In 1950, a quiet, unassuming man named James Hampton rented a garage in Washington D.C. Hampton was a night janitor for a government building, and every morning when he would leave his shift, he would head to this garage and work inside it for hours before returning home to sleep and begin the cycle again. He kept the garage locked at all times and worked in it for fourteen years.

Then, in 1964, Hampton died of stomach cancer, and the owner of the garage decided to break the bolt and open the door. Perhaps the landlord was hoping to find that Hampton had been working on a car or something valuable that he could sell to recoup some of the rent. Imagine his surprise when he threw open the door and found a glittering throne surrounded by lecterns, stands, tables, crowns, tablets, and more . . . 180 pieces in all.

It turns out, James Hampton had been building a throne for the return of Christ, and he had been doing it out of aluminum foil, gold candy wrappers, cardboard, old light bulbs, air conditioning ducts, thumbtacks, glue, pins, and tape. Out of the trash of our lives, James Hampton was making way for the Coming of our Lord. In his 108-page loose-leaf notebook,

²⁰ Rev. 21:2

²¹ Taylor, James. "Shed a Little Light." *Greatest Hits Volume 2*. Columbia, 2000. CD.

²² Augustine. *Confessions*. Book 1, Chapter 1.

he called it *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*.²³ To this day, it can be found on display in the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.



I have often wondered what those early mornings were like in that garage of his *and* what it was like in that *mind* of his. Here was a man who was downright “soul-possessed” by something larger than himself, grasped by the promise of a Deity who would not let him go. Some would surely say that James Hampton must have been crazy—that he was decidedly *not* of a sound mind—but I’m not so sure.

Look at the simple inscription rendered in foil just above the crest of the chair. In perfect block letters, the throne of the Almighty boldly declares to all who would gaze upon his glory: “FEAR NOT.”



This, my friends, was a man ruled by an unbridled hope, not a spirit of fear. May the same be said of us . . . today and everyday, until that Great Day.

²³ I first learned of this piece through Thorne, Jesse. “Big Boi & Catherine O’Hara.” Podcast. *Bullseye with Jesse Thorne*. MaximumFun, 19 May 2015. Web.

CONCLUSION

As it turns out, the Second Coming of our Lord is neither a witless joke nor an empty threat, neither a twisted fable nor a foolish fairy tale. It is a promise, the culmination of all grace, the source of Hope with a capital H. If the cross was the unequivocal declaration of God's redeeming love, the Second Coming is the period, the exclamation point, the full stop that will bring us to the fullness of our joy.

And it is for that reason, dear friends, that our God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

Thanks be to God.

CLOSING PRAYER

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*²⁴

²⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer.* 280.