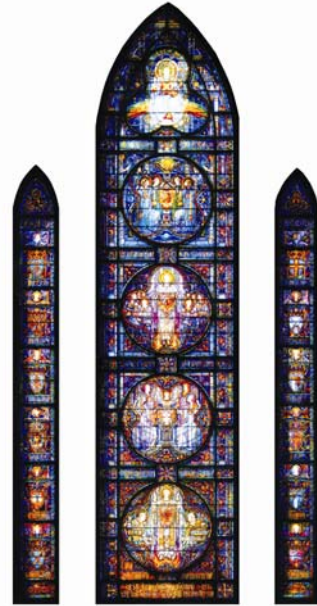


November 27, 2011

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sermons



"Don't make Me Come Down There" – God By The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Philippians 1:3-11

As a young child, the most feared words in our house were these: "Just wait 'til your father comes home!" When we heard our mother say that, my brother and I knew that we had pushed her to the limit. Hints that we were approaching that limit were phrases like "Mike, stop teasing your brother!" "Sandy, stop whining. You're not hurt!" "Boys, don't make me come up there!"

Do you remember several years ago, when those messages from God appeared on billboards all over the place?

My way is the highway. - God
Loved the wedding, invite me to the marriage. - God
That "Love Thy Neighbor" thing...I meant that. - God

I understand they have a new campaign and a web site: Godspeaks.com.

Well, years ago I remember I burst out laughing when I first saw the one I've used to title today's sermon. All the memories of my early childhood came rushing back. Don't make me come down there – God. Imagine - God in heaven looking down on us and being frustrated at our whining, bully-

ing and misbehaving. God becomes so frustrated that God shouts a final warning, "Don't make me come down there!" We know there will be hell to pay, if it comes to that.

When I saw that billboard, I began to laugh because of my early childhood memories but also because I don't think of God like that. Don't get me wrong. I imagine God is frustrated at our whining, bullying and misbehaving, but I don't see God as a vengeful, punishing disciplinarian. I know some Christians do. You can hear them on the radio late at night. Many of these Christians have focused on the "Second Coming" as a way for God to settle the score.

Now, I realize that even in mentioning that phrase "Second Coming" I risk turning many of you off. Please stay with me. This is a difficult doctrine but one that is central to our faith. Let's have an open mind as we discuss "the Day of Christ" as the early church named it – the Parousia, the end of time, the last days.

You recall that Advent literally means "coming" or "arrival." I believe that it's helpful to distinguish three kinds of coming or arrivals in Advent:

First and most obvious there is the coming of Jesus into the world, born in Bethlehem, laid in a manger. While it occurred 2000 years ago we still celebrate this "coming" each Advent - Jesus' birthday.

Second, there is the coming of Jesus into our lives at Christmas. We pray and sing that he will "Be born in us today." (*O Little Town of Bethlehem*)

Finally, there is the Second Coming, Jesus returning to earth to bring us to where he is.

Even though this expectation is all over the New Testament; even though it is part of our most popular affirmations of faith such as the Apostle's Creed (...from thence **he shall come** to judge the quick and the dead...), we still are uncomfortable with it. The Bible ends with these words: "Surely I am coming soon. Amen. Come Lord Jesus." But, still we pretend that it is not part of our Advent celebration. We skip over those end of times passages in our Bibles and daily devotions. We choose to discuss the first two kinds of coming; hardly ever the third way. Why is that?

Discomfort? Well, sure, the whole idea of a cosmic Christ arriving in the sky on a horse in the clouds with a heavenly host of angel choirs is a little unsettling. We've been told our mistakes will be revealed; our secrets will be made known. Books will be opened, and names will be read. We know God is holy; we know that we are not holy. A perfect light casts a large shadow. How could the thought of God's return bring anything but discomfort?

Besides this doctrine is amazingly popular with the beyond the fringe crowd. We've heard the fundamentalist preachers shout about "the mark of the beast," and "the battle of Armageddon," and "the wars and rumors of wars." And, what was it that fellow said on TV: "Avoid all phone numbers with the digits 666"? And, what about that magazine article disclosing our President as the Antichrist? Discomforting to say the least.

I guess what bothers me most about the “Second Coming” is how it has been taken over and distorted by these conservative or fundamentalist Christians. They have interpreted the “Second Coming” as a time of awful terror and judgment – a time of separation of the blessed and the damned, a time of inclusion and exclusion. What bothers me so much is that the values that are affirmed at the “First Coming” in Bethlehem are so at odds with the values that are here being affirmed in the “Second Coming.” Then, in Bethlehem, it was peace, hope, love, and joy. Now, in their fierce predictions it is terror, anger, punishment and judgment. Is this a **different** Jesus who returns to us?

We all know that God is love. The only power in God is the power of love. And, we also all know that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Do you really think in the end God will run out of patience and come down in anger and bash us about? I don't. Somebody said, “There is wrath to come!” I don't believe it. No, there is no wrath, no hatred, nothing in God but love.

Have you ever gone to a play where the first two acts were great and then it died? A wonderful start, but it didn't know how to end? Or, a movie, the same thing? I'm looking forward to the new Mission Impossible movie, but if it's anything like the others the best part will take place before they even show the opening credits. I don't think the drama of God's world will play out that way. I believe the ending will be worthy of the drama. All the values that God holds up within the drama – truth, justice, the humble walk, mercy, love, peace, hope, forgiveness – all these values will be affirmed and vindicated in the end. The end will not let us down; it will be worthy of God's drama.

Jesus said it plainly in John 14: “Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust in me...I will come back and take you with me.” (John 14:1,3)

Don't be troubled by the return of Christ. Don't be anxious about things you cannot comprehend. Issues like the Parousia, the end times, are intended to challenge and stretch us, but not overwhelm and certainly not divide us. For the Christian, the return of Christ is not a riddle to be solved or a code to be broken, but rather a day to be anticipated and welcomed.

I remember, when I was a young father I wanted the same for my children. Twice a year I would leave home for a week of study leave. With a kiss and a hug, I walked out the door and promised to return. Did I want to leave them? No, but if I were to fulfill my call I had to go. While I was away, did I want them to feel discomfort? Did I want them dreading my return? Of course not. Did I want them to fear my return? Don't be silly. What about denial? Would I have been pleased to hear that they had removed my picture from the refrigerator door and my plate from the table and were refusing to discuss my return? I don't think so.

Jamie and Erin didn't understand all the intricacies of my responsibility; we don't understand all the details of God's responsibilities. But, our job in the meantime? Trust. Soon the final chapter will be crafted and he'll appear at the door. But, until then Jesus says: “Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust in me.”

In 1996 George Tulloch led an expedition to the spot where the *Titanic* sank in 1912. He and his crew recovered numerous artifacts, everything from eyeglasses to jewelry to china plates. In his search, Tulloch realized that a large piece of the hull had broken from the ship and was resting a

short distance away. Tulloch immediately saw an opportunity. Here was a chance to rescue part of the ship itself.

The team set out to raise the twenty-ton piece of iron and place it on their boat. They were successful in lifting it to the surface, but a storm blew in and the ropes broke and the Atlantic Ocean reclaimed her treasure. Tulloch was forced to retreat and regroup. But, before he left, he did something curious. He descended into the deep and, with the robotic arm of his submarine, attached a strip of metal to a section of the hull. On the hull he had written these words, "I will come back, George Tulloch."

At first glance, his action is humorous. I mean, it's not like he has to worry about folks stealing his piece of iron. For one thing it's two and one-half miles below the surface of the Atlantic. For another, well, it's a piece of junk – a very heavy piece of junk. We wonder why anyone would be so attracted to it.

Of course one might say the same thing about you and me. Why would God go to such efforts to reclaim us? What good are we to God? God must have God's reasons because two thousand years ago, God entered the murky waters of our world in search for his children. And, on all that will allow him to do so, God lays his claim and tags his name. "I will come back," God says.

George Tulloch came back. Two years later he returned and rescued his piece of iron. Jesus will as well. We don't know **when** he will come for us. We don't know **how** he will come for us. And, we really don't even know **why** he would come for us. Oh, we have our ideas and opinions. But, most of what we have is faith. Faith that he will come to reclaim us and that when he does he will bring to us his love, his peace, his justice, his forgiveness, his truth, his mercy and his acceptance just like he promised.

Let us pray:

Come Lord Jesus, we don't know what that means, but don't let that stop you. Amen.