

11-2-25 Sermon – “Christ in Flesh and Blood” – Ephesians 1:15-23 & Revelation 7:9-17

The early church had a problem, and that problem had to do with the Second Coming of Christ.

Jesus told his disciples he would return again after his death and resurrection. And when we read the writings of that first generation of Christians – like the letters of Paul – we realize that the early Christians really did expect Jesus to come back during their lifetimes. Paul assumes that many of his readers will still be alive at the time of the Second Coming. He advises them not to get married because, well, what’s the point of earthly institutions if Jesus is coming back?

For that first generation of Christians, the apocalypse is immanent. Christ is coming on the clouds – any day now! – and will return to earth to set things right.

Now, I don’t know what you do or don’t believe or believe about the Second Coming. To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what *I* do or don’t believe about the Second Coming – except that when I read the news these days I kind of wish Jesus *would* come riding on the clouds to set things right! But after over 2000 years of waiting, it becomes a little hard to believe this idea that Jesus is *just about* to return. Doesn’t it?

As it turns out, this is exactly the problem that plagued the early church. Jesus did not return as expected, within a few days, a few months, a few years, a few decades. And they began to wonder if maybe they had misunderstood the message.

So the church adapted. If we read through the New Testament in chronological order – which (spoilers!) is not at *all* the order that’s in our Bibles – we see an interesting pattern take shape, a shift in thinking about how Christ is present on earth.

For example, take the letter to the Ephesians. Though tradition has attributed this letter to Paul, the vocabulary and writing style are completely different from Paul’s authentic letters. Which makes us think that someone wrote it and attributed it to him, years or even decades after his death.

Another reason scholars think Ephesians came later – and is not Pauline – is that it contains exactly zero references to the Second Coming. Our best guess is that this letter is the work of second or third generation Christians, believers who had grown weary of waiting for the End with bated breath, so instead had started looking around...was there another way that they could see the presence of Christ in their midst?

Something similar happens in the Book of Revelation. We hear it in this morning’s reading...but before I get there, a brief word – and warning! – about the Book of Revelation.

Revelation is a symbolic, poetic, text about what happens when an evil empire crumbles. It is *not* a secret coded roadmap to how things will unfold in the end times. It’s not even *about* the end times, really; it’s about God’s triumph over evil in human history. Revelation is actually a lot like Star Wars or Happy Potter – a fantastical, other-worldly tale that conveys profound this-worldly truths. Just no wookies...sorry. But there is a beast!

So in this symbolic story about good and evil, the text we heard this morning begins with two words that may have piqued your curiosity – “after this.” After this. Which means we need to know what happens before.

Right *before* this morning’s reading, the author (John) sees a vision of a heavenly scroll bound with seven seals. To open the scroll, an angel breaks through the seals, one by one. And as each seal is broken, another plague of apocalyptic woe comes upon the earth. War and pestilence and famine, oh my!

The seals are broken – one, two, three, four, five, six... Anticipation builds as the readers expect the seventh and final seal. In the Bible, the number seven signifies completeness, wholeness. Which means that John's readers – those early Christians – are expecting 'The End.' The apocalypse. The last battle, the final reckoning. Jesus coming on the clouds to save them and set things right.

But that's not what happens this morning's reading, is it?

No, instead, John writes, "After this, I looked, and there was a great multitude from every nation. They stood before the throne and praised God, day and night. In a loud voice, they sang, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!'"

Y'all, that doesn't sound like the last battle of the apocalypse. That sounds like choir practice!

Those early Christians were waiting, watching, hoping for Christ's Second Coming. They were looking for the End. Instead, what they got is the Church.

That's what the author of Ephesians finds, too. The Christians to whom he writes are not swept up in the clouds to meet their Lord, they are bound up with one another in one body – the Church – with Christ as their head.

The early Christians wanted to meet Jesus in the heavens. Instead, Jesus came to them – comes to *us* – in one another.

Now, I can understand why they might have *preferred* the Second Coming to the Church. It's easier to imagine meeting Christ in the clouds than it is meeting Christ in our neighbors. Because the Church is made up of *people*, and people can be...messy. And difficult. All the saints are also sinners, and all the sinners are also saints.

The church as Christ's body – Christ in flesh and blood – is a remarkably inefficient way for God to be present on earth. But friends, I do think this is the great theological breakthrough of the early church. We cannot get to God without going through one another. Salvation is meaningless if it is a solo affair. To be in communion with Christ, we must also be in communion with one another. With all the mess, confusion, irritation, and heartbreak that communion requires.

So friends, happy All Saints' Day. Behold yourselves and one another – the body of Christ's. The great Communion of Saints. Rejoice, your Lord is come. Amen.