

THE BON AIR PULPIT

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Scripture: *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

Sermon: *Expecting the Lord Frequently*

Now brothers, about times and dates we do not have to write you. The times and dates about when all of this is going to happen. He says for you know very well that the day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night. While people are saying peace and safety, destruction will come on them suddenly as labor pains on a pregnant woman and they will not escape.

So many times when people begin to talk about the last days, they begin to talk about all the great, terrible events that are happening and they say, “Oh, this must be the sign.” But I find it fascinating that when the Bible talks about it, it says when things are just going normally. When everybody says things are really going well for a change, that may be the time when it happens. But you brothers are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you as a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day, you do not belong to the night or the darkness so then let us be not like others who are in the darkness, but let us be alert and self control. For those who are in the darkness sleep and those who get drunk, get drunk at night but since we belong to the day, let us be self controlled putting on faith and love as a breast plate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have just celebrated the first coming of Jesus into the world. It was a very localized and very low keyed event. He was

born in a small, southern, Judean town, called Bethlehem. He was born in a stable. Even though angels told some shepherds to go in to see about it, I doubt if very many people in Bethlehem knew that a new baby had been born that day. He came in the most normal way and shared the most common of all human experiences, he came as a little baby. Wise men came two years later and they came to Jerusalem which is only six miles away from Bethlehem and went to the political and religious elite and they didn't know that Jesus had been born. The only thing that you heard that night was the cry of a baby, the love language of a mother, and the silence of the night. When Jesus came, He said, but I want you to know that I am going to come again. But this time every thing about it is going to be different. This time it is going to be an earth shattering, cataclysmic invasion of heaven on earth. It is going to be a time when no news reporter is going to have to tell the rest of the world what has happened in another part of the world. For even though we live on a globe where half of the world is asleep while the other half is awake, the Bible says *that when He comes, every eye shall see Him* and every person shall be aware at exactly the same time that He has come to be present.

This time, there are not going to be any soft lullabies, but the Bible says that it shall be with the voice of an arc angel which is the roar of thunder and the sound of a trumpet that God Himself shall blow. This time the angels will not come as singers to shepherds, they will come as soldiers to establish again God's authority on the earth. See what we have acted like are a band of criminals and we have tried to hijack God's earth and run it for our own pleasure.

One day the authority of heaven will be re-established and God shall send His angels to come and bring it to pass. We sung the first time “Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Calm,” but on that occasion, there will be no Silent Night but it will be violent night and everything will be in turmoil.

The Bible says that God shall come and this earth, even the very elements of it, shall burn up and God shall take the ashes of this old world and use it as fertilizer to build a new world. This earth-shattering, time-ending, justice-establishing, blessing- bringing time is what we, as Christians call the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The Bible says all the way through it, that this is the way God has created the world, that it is on a timetable and one day God is going to say, this far and no further and He is going to end it. When you read through the New Testament, it talks about the last days, the second coming more than any other subject except two. That is about our relationship to God and about the stewardship of all that He has given us. You can hardly turn through the New Testament without recognizing that it begins to allude or speak clearly about His coming again. In fact, it is the last words that Jesus spoke to His disciples. He began to talk to them about His coming again and when you read the end chapter of the New Testament, on three different occasions, Jesus says in it, *Now behold I am coming again, behold I am coming again.* When we celebrate the Lords supper, a part of that alludes to the second coming of Christ. Jesus said about that moment, *You are to do this until we will eat it again in the kingdom.* I can hardly ever stand behind this table to hand out to you the elements of the Lord's Supper without thinking of millions and millions and millions of people, all gathered around our Lord and He taking the bread and the wine and handing it to us all as we come to celebrate the fact that He has ended the world on His time table. Now since so much is in the Bible about it, I wanted to raise some issues with you this morning to ask the question, why is there so much and what can you and I learn about it.

The first thing we ought to learn from our passage of scripture is that it ought to motivate us to Christian action. The second coming of Jesus Christ is not a parlor game for theologians. It is not raising all kinds of questions for which there

are not answers. It is a motivation for us to practical, Christian living. What it says to us is, you need to know that we are living under a time table. Jesus may decide to come today, to end the world as we know it, therefore we ought to get about doing what He called us to do. Now the word He uses is the word, watch.

My wife is a registered physical therapist, received her medical training down at the University of Texas, in Galveston. If you have been to Galveston, you know it is about thirty miles south of Houston, it is on the Gulf of Mexico and everything is flat. In the 1900's there were no satellites, no weather planes, and no television reporters. People in Galveston woke up one day and realized it was cloudy and raining but they had seen that hundreds of times before. What they did not realize was what had been brewing in the gulf was the most powerful hurricane ever to hit the United States. The storm hit south Florida and did more property damage in the last century than any other and is still the most deadly hurricane that ever hit the United States. The question we ask is why could that happen in America? The reason was there was nobody to warn them. They didn't know it was there. Today, if I told you there was a storm off the Virginia coast, it is getting ready to come through Richmond, you can watch it on television, you can see it on satellite, you can make preparation for it. Listen to what Jesus says. Jesus says, there is a storm coming. Jesus says, it is going to come.

You just can't plot it on a computer, you can't put it on a map, but it is on the way. Therefore, you ought to live everyday with a sense of watchful anticipation that it may come today. It is exactly the same word that is used for a woman who is getting ready to have a baby. You come home, you women who have given birth, your doctor has told you at a certain time the baby is coming. What do you

do? You begin to make preparation. The baby is coming. We have to get some clothes, food and we have to do these sorts of things because we know this is on the way. Same word in the Bible.

The Bible says what you need to do is to recognize that something tremendous is getting ready to happen. This ought to make you live with a sense of urgency and commitment to God. I need to remind you that religion is not a parlor game. It is not sitting around asking questions for which there are no answers. We as Christians love to do that, we can raise more issues and more questions, to evade more responsibilities than any group you can imagine.

We have unearthed some of the religious discussions of people in Jesus day. I thought you would like to get in on some of the debates. I want to tell you one of the things they were discussing when Jesus arrived. What they were discussing and debating was how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? At the same time, people had not heard the story of God, people were hungry, people were sick and people were in small rooms, trying to decide how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. What we need to be reminded of is that when we hear the term that there is a storm is coming, what it ought to do, is it ought to motivate us for Christian living. If we understand that the storm may come today, how ought we to live in light of that understanding.

Several weeks ago I read an article and it is a word that I said I would never use again and that is Y2K. The article was talking about Y2K and then it said isn't it interesting how we became so involved in Y2K. It is true that businesses in America spent more to try and correct the Y2K problem than any other one event in the history of American business. You could not pick up a newspaper without reading about it. This month, six thousand

children are going to die because they don't have enough to eat. Why don't we become disturbed about Y2 six thousand? If you are not aware, there are now thirty million people in the world who are diagnosed with HIV. Where it is primarily located is in Sub Sahara Africa where they have spent a century trying to get their life expectancy up to forty five and now in the next ten years, the life expectancy in Sub Sahara Africa is going to be thirty-four. They are dealing with the fact that they are going to have at least ten million orphans. The question is why not Y2 ten million. Because of the rapid increase of the world's population, this year forty four million people will die. Half of them have never given their heart and their life to Christ. Why don't we talk about Y2 forty four million? What the Bible says is once you understand this, that what it ought to do is make you recognize that we have an accountability, we have a time frame, and therefore we ought to live and to live for God as best as we can.

Last month I received a phone call at work. It was from a friend of mine who lives in Florida and he was coming through Richmond. He said, "My schedule has changed. I am going to be in Richmond most of the day and I would like to spend it with you and if it is all right, I would like to spend the night at your house." "Of course." I called Judy. "Judy, I just got a phone call, we are going to have guests this afternoon and for supper tonight. James will spend the night with us. " My wife began to speak in very short commands. "Come home quick. Move this now. Hide that over there. Go to the store quickly. Get out the vacuum cleaner." Lots of short, quick, commands. My statement was if I would go for all of that preparation for a friend that I see once a year, what kind of preparation ought I to make if before the day is over, I might meet Jesus. What we ought to live with, is a sense that the storm is coming, the baby is on the way, Jesus has set the time and therefore we ought to live with a sense of

motivation and commitment. The second thing that it ought to do for us is to give us hope.

We receive at the church, from a religious news service all kinds of Christian news events. This one is entitled "Church growing faster than ever, but at a greater cost." I don't know whether you are aware but I want you to put this statistic in your mind. More people have died for the name of Jesus in 1999 than in all the rest of the two centuries. One year, most deadly year, for Christian martyrs was 1999. Listen just a moment. The senior Roman Catholic Bishop in China spent fifteen years in prison. He has repeatedly been tortured and has disappeared and was last seen with a government security official. A prominent national leader was executed on October 14 by the firing squad. A young Baptist deacon was kidnapped and militants demanded that his church sell its building and use the money to pay the ransom. The deacon had the responsibility because the pastor had been kidnapped and beheaded. In India, a twenty six year old Catholic nun was raped and mocked for her faith. Twenty two villages, of one tribe who are mostly Christian, were attacked by government military forces. A Coptic priest in Egypt was shot. A Vietnam security police raids a house church. A largely Christian Sudanese province, seven hundred people, die of starvation every day and fifty thousand, mostly Christian children have been sold into slavery at the going rate of fifty dollars. I want to ask you a question. Why would people be willing to do this? Why, if you know that you may starve for your faith, your children maybe kidnapped and sold as slaves, or you as a Christian leader may die for your faith, why would you do that? The answer is because Christian people live with hope. The hope is that regardless of what may go on in this world, God through Jesus Christ, will ultimately have the last say so.

The reason that Christians have been willing to go through all kinds of things is that we do not believe in a God who is walking around in

heaven, rubbing His hands and saying, "*Oh, I wish I could do something.*" One day He is going to come and He is going to have the final say so, and every person who has been against what He has stood for is going to have to stand before Him. I love what one man said. Nietzsche, the German philosopher, was the man who coined the little phrase, God is dead. They said one day he wrote on a piece of paper, God is dead, Nietzsche. They said you can't read it but it is written in heaven. Twenty years later it wrote Nietzsche is dead, God. The reason Christians have been able to live through persecution and difficulty is the understanding that ultimately Jesus Christ will have the last say so.

One of the most famous sermons now in America is entitled, It is Friday but Sunday is Coming. Dr. Campolo took the phrase from an elderly, black, minister and has built this sermon. It is a sermon that on Friday, it looked like all hell had broke loose. Jesus is on the cross and you wonder where God is. Then Sunday comes and He is raised again. We as Christians live on Saturday. Friday is already over, Sunday hadn't come yet, but we say it is Saturday but Sunday is coming. We understand that one day the glory of God shall fill the earth as waters cover the sea and that Christ shall be exalted and Christians live in all kinds of difficulty because of hope.

The third thing you and I can learn is, it will help us get a more clear understanding of who Jesus is. I tell people you don't understand who Jesus is if you think Jesus started as a little baby in Bethlehem. What the Bible teaches is that Jesus is the eternal Son of God. What the Bethlehem is, is the eternal Son of God came in the form of a little baby in Bethlehem. If you just go look at a little baby in Bethlehem and think that is when He started, you will never understand

Jesus. If you go and stand at the cross and think that is just a martyr dying for His beliefs, then you will never understand the cross. If you don't understand that this is the eternal Son of God who came to the earth and He is dying on the cross for the sins of the world, you will never understand who He is. I also say to people, you will never understand who Jesus is, until you see that He is the one that God says is going to return to the world and end time as we know it.

Now boys and girls, you need to be aware that Jesus is not some old man walking around in a bathrobe bare footed. That is the way we picture Him in church. You need to understand that when Jesus speaks, He may speak softly but He speaks with the authority of God. When He says this is how you ought to live, it is not an option. I want you to listen to what He said. *You shall see me, the Son of Man, sitting on the right hand of power and I will come in the clouds of heaven.* Hear the last book of the Bible. He will come in the clouds and every eye shall see Him and all of the people of the earth shall mourn before Him. In the Greek language, the omega is the Z. Listen to Jesus. *I am the alpha, I am the A. I started everything. I am also omega. I am the Z. I end everything.* You understand Jesus only when you understand that He is the omega of God. He is the one who is going to come and end everything. Therefore, if He says something, I sure better listen to what He says. All of us do have a choice about Jesus. The choice is when and how you are going to acknowledge that He is Lord. I will show you what I mean. You can come to a church like this and you can hear about Jesus and you can hear a preacher like me say He is Lord. That means He is boss of everything. There is nothing He is not Lord over. I hear that and I say Lord, I acknowledge who You are. You are Lord over everything so you need to be Lord

over me. I want to give you my life and I want to do what you want me to do. You are my Lord. I understand Lord that you died on the cross for my sins and so I ask for your forgiveness and I submit myself that you be the Lord of my life. For those of us who have done that, the second coming of Christ is what we call our blessed hope. It is the time when He is going to come and establish His kingdom on earth. You don't have to do that. In fact, He gives you the right not to do that. Listen to the difference. The Bible says that when He comes, "every knee shall bow, every tongue shall confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father." What it is going to mean is this enormous power of eternity, this very essence of God is going to appear and everybody is going to fall on their face and they are going to say, "Now we know. You are who you said you are." The only issue is how or when. You will either do it now or you will do it then. You will either do it in love for what He has done for us or then you will do it in fear for what you recognize. Everybody is going to do it. If you have not done it, then your hope now is to run to the cross and ask for forgiveness and surrender yourself to Him to be Lord. If He comes today, and you have not done it, you will say it. But you will not say it because you love Him, you will say it because you have no other option.

Why do I stand here every Sunday and encourage people to give their heart and their life to Christ? Because I deeply, deeply, believe this may be the moment. If you don't do it now, you may never do it.

The country in the world who has developed the art of plays and play writing, perhaps more than any other is the country of England. People go from all over the world to sit at the theaters of the play writers of England. There is a tradition in England, after you have been through the plays and listened to the people, to the dream and got caught up in all the drama after everyone stands and applauds the actors then the tradition is the playwright comes on the stage. This

is the law of English theater. When the author comes on the stage, the play is over. When Jesus comes again, the play is over. All the more reason why everyone of us ought to live for Him now before the curtain comes down.