

“On My Honor”

Sermon – November 30, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

“On my honor.” If you were a Boy Scout, you recognized this as the beginning of the Scout Oath and likely started mentally filling in the rest: “I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country. To obey the Scout Law. To help other people at all times and to keep myself physically fit, mentally awake, and morally straight.”

Normally, I might bring up something like this on Scout Sunday in February, but it seemed apropos to today’s lectionary.

Today is the first Sunday of the new year in the church calendar, the first Sunday in the season of Advent. “Advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus* meaning “coming” or “arrival.”

So, the season of Advent is a season of waiting; a time of preparation. We prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.

And while we naturally think about the coming of the Christ Child, which celebrate on December 25th, the first Sunday of Advent always focuses on the second—and final—coming of Christ. That time is also called the Parousia, which means “coming” or “arrival” in Greek, the original language of New Testament.

The lectionary gospel texts in particular on this Sunday are always apocalyptic, that is, focusing on the end times.

Many Christians, from the beginning to today, have at least wondered about the end days. And while that is natural to do, some have overly focused, even obsessed, on them.

In particular, is the concept of the “rapture.” There are different versions of it, but the common one is the Antichrist comes to power, Christians are removed from the earth in a rapture (which means to “snatch” or “carry off”), then seven years of tribulation culminating in a great

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battle of Armageddon in which Christ will triumph over evil and establish a literal 1,000-year reign of his kingdom on earth.

In fact, there is a popular book series called “Left Behind” dealing with this idea. But this concept really got started only 200 years ago by a guy named John Darby and really only became popular in our lifetimes. There is no real scriptural or church history basis for this, so the mainline denominations, including Presbyterians, do not subscribe to it.

Maybe next summer I’ll do a sermon on the whole “dispensationalism” and “pre- and post-millennialism” concepts, which include the rapture.

In today’s gospel lesson from Matthew 24 verses 40-41, Jesus does say,
“Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.”

But, as in the case of Noah and the flood, it is the faithful who will remain; it is the others that will be taken away to judgment.

Still, living faithfully in this time waiting for the culmination of Christ’ reign does not mean that we can rest on God’s grace. It means that God has given us all the more responsibility for doing God’s will on earth as it is done in heaven.

The faithful ones left behind in the field and the mill now have added work. But this is not an added burden; it is a gift from God. Having already been transformed by the Christ-event, the church is invited to participate in the transformation of the world yet still in process!

Beginning the liturgical season of Advent with the Second Coming reminds us that the work of the first advent (coming) of Jesus is not complete. The risen Jesus instructs and empowers us the church to continue our witness until the Second Coming.

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We watch for the signs of God's presence in power, especially as revealed through the cross and the resurrection, in healing the sick, standing with the broken and suffering, bringing sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf.

We are called to see the mystery and the promise of the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary routines of life, or even in those disastrous events that make God's presence so difficult to envision.

Being prepared for the coming of the Lord takes place in daily dying and rising, living out our baptism and faith in this world.

The hope we have is not personal only, and it certainly is not simply private. It is a communal hope. The church is a community of hope and responsibility in the world.

We are to embody the excitement, the expectation, the surety of God's promise to be near us as we live in faithful discipleship while waiting the coming of Christ our Lord.

Advent, as we know, is a time of hope and longing, but also a time of repentance. We acknowledge our recalcitrance, our resistance to God's peace, and the challenge to staying on the ways and paths of God.

God is taking us somewhere we cannot go on our own—not because of our righteousness, but because of God's goodness. The coming peace is God's, but it is promised to us. And thus, as Isaiah in today's Old Testament passage spoke to Israel (and now to us), we are called to act in the meantime as though the promise is ours.

We cannot usher in the kingdom of peace. But, by God's grace, we can practice peace within ourselves, among our families, in our congregations, in our neighborhoods, for our world.

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Christmas comes not to awaken nostalgia, but to awaken our hearts to the ways of God, calling us to conversion and setting us free to be agents of God in the world to which Christ came even, as Isaiah urged Israel to do, to learn from and make common cause with the “nations,” the outsiders, the others.

For, under God's instruction, there is no more “other,” no more “we” and “they”; and until that happens, there is no peace. God is taking us there, says Isaiah, and, though that kingdom is not ours to make, it is ours to practice for, as we learn at Christmas, it has come in person to reside in our midst.

What might that look like in practice? Paul speaks to that in today's epistle lesson from Romans 13. Here the people are wondering when the end is coming and Paul tells them it is near (though perhaps not as near as he thought).

He notes that God's people follow the way of salvation, but this present time and place do not mark the end of salvation. Christ-followers should act as people on the way, not as people who imagine they have already have arrived and are just waiting to be beamed up.

The passage is less about one's personal, individual behavior and salvation and more about the relationships that Christ-believers have with each other.

Salvation needs to be actualized in the everyday behavior of Christ-believers, a behavior that must reflect the standards of God and not those of the world.

We are called to remember that Christians need to live their lives in the world, but not according to the standards of the world. Be in the world, but not of the world.

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As Paul writes, as Christians we are to “live honorably,” exhibiting a way of life that we practice day by day, so that we are neither anxious nor obsessed about the end because we know whenever it is we are prepared.

As Christians, we are never to consider other people as our enemies, no matter how bitter the divisions in the church may be, nor how painful our experiences. Rather, we are to fight against the destructive powers that enslave and divide people, which can include a history of mistrust and injustice, addictions, thirst for revenge, prejudice and fear, greed, and so forth.

Instead, we wait for Christ’s coming by becoming the Christ people: shunning the deeds that mark the world not subjected to Christ’s reign of peace and justice. We wait for Christ’s coming by becoming that future ahead of his arrival, so that when he arrives, he will behold his own as though looking in a mirror. And we do so with honor.

As Nelson Mandela said, “Honor belongs to those who never forsake the truth even when things seem dark and grim, who try over and over again, who are never discouraged by insults, humiliation and even defeat.”

So go forth in hope with honor.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.