

SERMON TITLE: "Coming Soon"

SERMON TEXT: Revelation 22:1-21

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: May 26, 2019, at First UMC (Memorial Dedication/Heritage Day)

INTRODUCTION

A couple weeks ago, I noticed that there was a new business development under construction along Highway 89 just south of Ogden. Then this past week, I read an article about a new cookie store and some other businesses that will soon be opening up in Riverdale. And a few days ago, when I was on 2700 North in Pleasant View, I saw a property that was being constructed. Out front there was one of those big signs that announced some kind of medical building was "coming soon."

Whenever we see or hear about new activity like that, it piques our interest. I suppose a "coming soon" message could be considered as bad news, kind of like those digital highway signs that indicate future traffic delays due to road construction. But even those advance warnings are meant to help us plan extra time or alternate routes, so we can have the best possible outcome during and after the construction project. As a general rule, "coming soon" announcements are intended to be good news, wise advice, and a hopeful promise of what is on the way.

I think that's what the writer of the Book of Revelation was intending in chapter 22 when he wrote that Jesus was coming soon. Throughout two millennia of Christianity, the Book of Revelation has often been misunderstood, considered frightening, or even used to threaten certain groups of people. But that really isn't why the book was written. It was meant much more to be a positive and victorious word of hope. So, this morning, I invite you to consider this passage with me, so we can find comfort and encouragement in the belief that Jesus is coming soon.

1—COMING SOON MEANS THE END OF SUFFERING

As we study this chapter, we see that the first meaning of Jesus' coming soon is that suffering will soon come to an end. Revelation 22, verses 1-5, describes this heavenly kingdom come down to

earth. In that kingdom, there will be a river which contains the water of life. All who are thirsty are invited to come and drink of this water as a gift. Next to the river will grow a tree of life, bearing fruit every month of the year—so that no one will ever go hungry. The leaves of that tree will have power to heal the nations, so that fighting and warring will cease. Light will continually shine from God, so that no one will have to experience the fearfulness and coldness of night.

How wonderful this image of God's kingdom must have sounded to those early Christians, for whom water was in short supply, food was a precious commodity, warring within and between nations was commonplace, and light came only from the sun or lamps of oil! Today we take so much for granted. We hardly have to think about water or food, and light is only a flip of the switch away.

Unfortunately, two thousand years haven't made a lot of difference on the issue of fighting within and between nations. While life seems relatively safe inside the powerful United States of America, even we feel our security threatened by shootings in our schools and communities. As we pause on this Memorial Day weekend to remember those soldiers and loved ones who have died, we recognize that modern medicine can't yet cure the pain of grief within our hearts. Whether we live in a third-world country or in a nice American neighborhood, suffering is still very much a part of our human experience.

Fortunately, we do not live without hope. As Christians, we can trust that Christ's coming will bring an end to human suffering. And even though Jesus hasn't yet returned in final victory, Christ has already come in every good deed done and in every touch of kindness offered. When we feed and clothe the poor, Christ is coming soon. When we provide shelter for the homeless, Christ is coming soon. When we support an agricultural missionary in Africa, Christ is coming soon. When we visit the lonely and care for the sick, Christ is coming soon. When we share our experience of Jesus with someone in need of spiritual direction, Christ is coming soon. Wherever pain is decreased; wherever

kindness, compassion, and encouragement are offered; there Christ has already come. Wherever suffering is already minimized, there is our hope that Christ is coming soon.

2—COMING SOON MEANS THE END OF SIN

The second piece of encouragement we gain from this chapter is that “coming soon” means that, when Jesus returns, sin will come to an end. Verses 14 and 15 spell this out most clearly.

The Book of Revelation was written as a great drama between the satanic, or adversarial, powers of evil, on the one hand, and the righteousness of God, on the other. The cosmic battle described in Revelation ends with the defeat of sinfulness and with the victory of what is good and right and true. Christ, the Lamb who was slain because of sin and injustice, is now enthroned in the new Jerusalem as the mighty ruler over the kingdom of God. According to Revelation 22, sexual promiscuity, murder, false worship, and dishonesty will not exist in this heavenly kingdom come down to earth. Instead, the inhabitants of the kingdom will be those who have been washed clean in God’s forgiveness and love.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we know how much sin is a part of our human life. Anyone who has ever sincerely prayed “forgive us our trespasses” and “lead us not into temptation” finds great relief in the thought of a time and place where sin would no longer be possible. What a joy it would be to put wrong thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors behind—once and for all—never to sin again.

Until then, the good news is that we get a foretaste of this joy every time we confess our sins and receive forgiveness through Christ. God’s cleansing power is not held back until the end of the world and Christ’s final return. Christ has already come soon with every act of divine forgiveness. Christ has already come soon for every sinner who has found relief from guilt. Christ has already come soon for every person whose life has been turned around and set on a new and more holy path. Christ has already come soon for every one of us who has accepted Christ’s call to follow as one of his disciples,

doing his work to the best of our ability in this not-yet-perfect world. Because of the forgiveness which has already come, we know that Christ's coming will put an end to sin.

3—COMING SOON MEANS NO ONE WILL MISS OUT

A third meaning of "coming soon" is that when Christ returns, no one will miss out. This was the fear of some of the early Christians. Because they believed that Christ would return during their lifetimes, they got worried when Christ's coming was delayed. The first readers of Revelation were facing persecution for their faith. Christians were being put to death. Would they miss out on the glory of God's kingdom? Would they miss seeing Jesus because they died before he returned?

I found a joke that illustrates this concern about timeliness.

At a funeral one afternoon, the funeral director was becoming worried about the length of the service. Stepping over to a member of the church, the funeral director whispered, "Does your pastor always speak this long at a funeral?"

"That's a fine sermon, isn't it?" the church member nodded.

Somewhat embarrassed, the funeral director agreed, but he continued to look at his watch every few minutes. After awhile, the member tugged at his sleeve.

"What's the matter with you?" the church member demanded.

"Don't you believe in the resurrection?"

"I sure do," the funeral director answered. "But I'm afraid we won't get this man buried in time for it."*

The response of Revelation to these concerns is that, no matter the timing—early or late—the faithful will be included in Christ's kingdom. Bible commentators tell us that the words of Revelation 22:20 come from the communion service of the early church. As they broke bread together, the Christians would pray, "Come, Lord Jesus." Then, while sharing the meal of Christ's body and blood, they experienced the risen Christ coming among them. So it was entirely natural that, here in Revelation 22, this communion language would be used to assure the Christians. Certainly, they would prefer that Christ would come right away and put an end to the persecutions. But, if like Christ, they had to suffer torture and be killed first, they would not miss out on Christ's coming kingdom. They would, for sure, be included.

Like those early Christians, we have an assurance that Christ will be with us whenever we die. That confidence comes from our experience of Christ coming to be with us now. When we worship together in the breaking of bread and singing of hymns, Christ is with us. When we call upon God in prayer and remember Jesus through the reading of scripture, Christ becomes real to us. Christ comes among us—now. Because we have known Christ to be with us in the past and the present, we can also trust that Christ will be with us in the future. If we remain faithful, we will not miss out. Christ is coming soon.

CONCLUSION

When I was a kid, I learned the song, “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain.” Do you remember that song?

She’ll be coming ‘round the mountain when she comes,
She’ll be coming ‘round the mountain when she comes,
She’ll be coming ‘round the mountain,
She’ll be coming ‘round the mountain,
She’ll be coming ‘round the mountain when she comes.

Beyond that, all I can remember is something about six white horses. I don’t recall who “She” was or why she was coming. But I remember the song was one of anticipation. The singers were looking forward to someone who was coming soon.

We who are Christians are looking forward to Jesus coming soon. We know he’s coming because our sins have already been washed clean by his forgiveness. We know he’s coming because suffering has already been diminished through kind and healing deeds of justice and mercy. And we know he’s coming because we’ve already experienced his presence in our worship. No matter when we live or when we die, we don’t have to worry. Christ has already come, Christ is with us now, and Christ is coming soon.

*Tad Bonham, *Clean Church Jokes*, (Broadman Press: Nashville, TN, 1986), p. 58.