

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
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Our Savior/St. Stephen's
Pentecost 24

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, here is a new word for your vocabulary.

The word is Parousia.

Spelled P-A-R-O-U-S-I-A. Parousia.

It is a Greek word that has come to serve sometimes as a synonym for the Second Coming of Christ.

Christ's Parousia refers to when Christ will come again at the end time.

And as we near the end of the Church Year, before we get to the season of Advent, which begins the new Church Year...

As we near the end of the Church Year, we find our Sunday readings beginning to focus on the Second Coming of Christ.

Each Church Year we journey from the expectation of Christ's birth in Advent to the incarnation of Christ at Christmas.

We journey from the season of Epiphany when we learn about who this child is that has come to be among us...

And then we arrive at the season of Lent, when we travel with our Lord to the cross.

And from the cross, we come to the celebration of the season of Easter, when we rejoice in Christ's resurrection.

And then we have the long green season following Pentecost, when we hear all sorts of stories about Jesus' ministry among us.

Until finally we arrive at the end of Pentecost, and the focus shifts toward Christ's coming again at the end time.

And so, yes, we get readings like the ones we have today.

Our first reading from the prophet of Amos talks about the Day of the Lord and what it will look like—a day of darkness and not light.

Our second reading from Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica talks about coming of the Lord which is accompanied by the archangel's call and the sound of God's trumpet.

And our Gospel reading from Matthew give us a parable about bridesmaids awaiting the coming of the bridegroom.

All these texts focus on the Parousia, Christ's coming at the end time.

PAUSE

Now, this term Parousia was not a term invented by the early Church.

No, the term Parousia was actually a borrowed term, and originally had nothing to do with Christ's coming at all.

It was term that the early Church adopted.

In ancient Rome, the term Parousia was used to describe the visit of a ruler or high official to some town or city.

On the occasion of such visits there were flattering speeches, delicacies to eat, pack animals for carrying of baggage, street improvements, and wreaths and gifts of money.

Such preparations as "street improvements" for a dignitary should call to mind in the Gospels the "street improvements" that preceded the coming Lord.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth."

How is that for street improvements?

The valleys shall be filled, and the mountains and hills be made low, so that the road is level and straight.

We do the similar in our day and age, when it comes to the visit of some dignitary.

When the President or a candidate for President visits our area, what happens?

The roads are shut down, the venue where the individual will speak is spruced up, and crowds throng to the site.

This is a Parousia, as it was originally understood.

It was the coming of a dignitary.

And when we read in 1 Thessalonians that individuals will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, it may not be so much that these individuals are ascending to God to be with God in heaven.

As much as it is that these individuals are going out to meet the Lord, much like persons in antiquity would go out to meet a dignitary as that dignitary approached their destination, and these persons would then accompany the dignitary the rest of the way, forming an entourage.

These individuals caught up in heaven may be meeting Jesus in the air to escort the Lord the rest of the way to earth.

PAUSE

Now, this is all fine and well, but what does the Parousia, the Second Coming, mean for the living of our days?

In short, what are we to do to prepare for the Second Coming?

The Gospel writer Matthew tells us to “Keep awake,” but what does that mean?

And after his description of the Lord’s Parousia, Paul says, “Encourage one another with these words.”

And what does that mean?

And Amos...well Amos tells us to forego our solemn assemblies, to give up our religious rituals, and instead focus on justice and righteousness.

PAUSE

Yes, we wonder what it means for us and for the world to focus on the coming of the Lord, especially when it seems the world has not a thought about the coming of the Lord.

For mostly what we see is a world not bent on welcoming God, but a world bent on hate and indifference, destruction and death.

There is, for instance, the continuing war in Ukraine, which has almost been relegated to the back burner, right?

Because, of course, now there is another tragic war going on in the Gaza.

And there is the threat that this war in the Middle East could escalate with Hezbollah and Iran getting into it.

And there is the rise in antisemitic sentiment in the world.

There is also the changing climate.

The bleaching of corals wreaths, the devastation of natural habitats, and the threat of biodiversity collapse.

There is also the ongoing problem in this country with respect to mass shootings and gun violence.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg with respect to the pain and hurt that exists in our world.

And all of this can seem so overwhelming that it immobilizes us such that we don't know what to do.

Yes, what does it mean to focus on the coming of the Lord in the midst of all this trauma?

What plea can Christianity make, so as to speak of the coming of the Lord?

What plea can Christianity make, so as to be heard?

To be sure, Christianity seems to go largely unheard.

We know that in this country anyway more and more people are turning away from organized religion of any kind.

I noted in a sermon recently that the largest percentage now of Americans, some 30%, describe themselves as "NONES," that is having no religious affiliation whatsoever.

And so, what does it mean in this time of the Church Year, at the end of the Church Year...

What does it mean for us to be talking about the Parousia, when the world is becoming ever more indifferent?

I won't lie to you, these are the questions I really struggle with.

And, I imagine you struggle with them, too.

I don't know about you, but in light of all I see going in the world, in light of all the anguish and suffering, I actually long with all my heart for the coming of the Lord.

I deeply long for the Lord to come, for the present age to be transformed, and for God to put things right.

I long for the Lord, because personally I am extremely doubtful that we will ever get this thing called "human existence in the world" right by ourselves.

Yes, we have made a big mess of God's creation and of the human global community.

And so, sisters and brothers in Christ, what do we do? As small as we are. As insignificant as we are. What possibly can we do?

PAUSE

So, there is a song that I return to over and over again, especially when I am overcome by the world's suffering.

It is called "Hallelujah." You might know it.

It was originally written and performed by Leonard Cohen.

But, my favorite version is by K.D. Lang who sang it during the opening of the 2010 Olympics.

Just Google "K.D. Lang Olympics" and a video of the performance should pop up. And watch it sometime.

She sings this song on a platform in a huge arena surrounded by nothing more than thousands of points of light held by countless individuals in the audience.

The performance is an absolutely holy experience.

There is no other way to describe it.

But it is not just the beauty of K.D. Lang's voice rising from that arena that is so moving.

Nor is it the beauty of those lights that is so wondrous.

No, it is also the words of the song.

For if we didn't know the song, "Hallelujah," speaks of various instances, several biblical in origin, where there is brokenness and heartache, where there is deep emotional pain and anguish, oftentimes self-afflicted.

The song speaks of David and Bathsheba and the trauma of that experience.

The song hints at Samson and Delilah and the trauma of that experience.

The song speaks of an individual's heartbreak and one's disillusionment about love.

But, over and over again, the refrain breaks in.

(Sing "Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.")

And that word, "Hallelujah," if we didn't know, means "Praise God."

Yes, hallelujah means "Praise God."

We are familiar no doubt with George Frederick Handel's "Alleluia" chorus from his *Messiah*.

That choral piece is filled with the word "alleluia." And in short, what is being said over and over again is "praise God, praise God, praise God, praise God, praise God."

Similarly, in Leonard Cohen's song, the word hallelujah appears repeatedly in the refrain, after each verse's description of some painful experience.

Why? What is Cohen saying in the text of his song?

But this...that even though we suffer, much of it by our doing, even though life is filled with heartache and trauma, even though things look really awful on the news, we still sing "praise God."

We can't help but do likewise.

Because God is still ultimately in control.

Because God is still present in things like beauty and hope and love.

Because even though we greatly struggle with things in life, life is still a gift to be cherished.

We sing “hallelujah,” because singing “Hallelujah” reminds us of these truths, and so we praise God.

That is why we come here after all to be reminded to sing God’s praise even in a broken world.

That is why maybe we should even sing in front of our televisions when we watch the evening news and see the horror.

“Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.”

Not because we are praising God for what is going on.

No, we sing our praise to God, because it gives us hope that things can and will change.

And we...we ourselves can be that impetus for change. But, we might not be able to muster the energy for change if we cannot even muster the power to sing.

Martin Luther said that we pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Thy kingdom come.”

But God’s kingdom comes, God’s Parousia happens whether we pray for it or not, says Martin Luther.

But, we pray that petition in the Lord’s Prayer (Thy Kingdom come), such that God’s kingdom might also come to us personally.

And that is the beginning of changing the world, one person at a time, when we pray for God’s kingdom to come to us, and we allow God’s kingdom to be seen in us.

Similarly, singing “Hallelujah” (praise God), reminds us to welcome God’s kingdom into our hearts even when we think the world around us is falling apart.

Singing “praise God” is indeed our way to going out to meet the Lord as he comes, as he makes his Parousia, and the Lord God then comes to be present among us.

Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Let us sing together the hymn “This is My Song.”