

“When Christ Shows Up”

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1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Luke 21:25-36

[Jesus said,]

Then the Son of Man will be seen, coming in a cloud with great power and glory.

When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave. You will soon be set free. Luke 21:27-28

Let us pray... O God,

May we be ready for when you show up.

May we align our hopes with your will to give us lives of purpose.

May we be ready to work with you as co-operators for the building up of your Beloved Community.
Amen

When I was a just a kid, I went to see a matinee movie

with a neighbor boy named Wayne, who was an older teen.

We went to see “The Colossus of Rhoades” about a legendary tower

of ancient times that was shaped like a man and was about a thousand feet tall.

It stood on both sides of the harbor entrance to protect the city of Rhoades

and would pour boiling oil down onto invading ships.

Rory Calhoun was the hero

and he was against the king of that city.

At a climatic point in the movie, Rory Calhoun was sword-fighting

with the king’s thugs at the top of the tower, on the shoulder of the Colossus.

He was outnumbered, but escaped by diving off the statue

into the waters below.

I cheered thinking he was going to come to the rescue

of the other good guys in the story.

But then my friend, Wayne, told me to quiet down, saying,

“What is one man going to do?”

He made me think... and in my opinion, it was a good lesson.

Sometimes, we give too much credit to one person to solve our problems in life –

especially celebrities who can seem larger than life, only to let us down.

What my teenage neighbor said, was echoed by what another friend said to me

at another time in my life:

‘No one rides into town on their white horse –

not even George Bush, and solves all the problems...’

Now at the time,

my friend was talking about the first George Bush, and may he rest in peace.

It is unfair to put that kind of responsibility or expectation on somebody –

and also unwise, because people can let you down.

Not always, but we human beings are prone to falter and ‘miss the mark’

which is a more accurate definition of ‘sin’.

So, maybe not Rory Calhoun, but what help can we expect for the problems we face?

Willard, p.2

Is it fair to put that kind of expectation
even on Jesus Christ?

We might be inclined to think of Jesus in the way that children think of Santa Claus,
who make their Christmas wish list in hopes they will get what they wanted –
only to be disappointed
when they don't get what they asked for,
or to be disappointed
when they do, and the thing they wanted turned out to be not so great after all.
By the way, I still think it is important to 'believe in Santa Claus'
but in a different way than just getting what we want.
We should believe in the 'Santa Claus' we can become.

Now regarding what Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount
from Matthew 7:7-12 of which I paraphrase...
'Ask and you will receive; Seek and you will find;
Knock and the door will open up to you.
For everyone who asks, will receive; Everyone who seeks, will find;
Everyone who knocks, will find their way.
If your children were to ask you for a loaf of bread,
would you give them a stone instead?
If they asked you for a fish,
would you give them a snake?
Even if you all were evil-doers, you would still know
to give good things to your children.
How much more so will God give you good things
when you ask for them,'

What this suggests is that our requests must align with the will of God –
that is to say, God's purposes which include God's love for us.
God seeks to be in dialogue with us, to meet our deepest needs,
while encouraging us to live lives of purpose.

Then, it is like what Jesus told his disciples:

*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer,
believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Mark 11:4 [RSV]*

It is at such times, Christ shows up to make a way where there seemed to be no way.
That understanding comes from experience and not by learning doctrine...

It was after the altar call at a Billy Graham Crusade in NYC around 1969,
that I sat down with a kind young man who showed me a picture
of the vast chasm of 'Sin' between 'Man' and 'God'.

Then, he showed me a second picture with a huge cross
labeled 'Christ' filling the chasm, illustrating 'Salvation'
as the answer to that chasm as the only way
to bridge the divide between humankind and God.

Willard, p.3

That formula has worked to conquer much of the world –
manipulated for that purpose.

Yet I still believe it is true, though it needs clarification for 21st Century people
who are caught amidst politically-correct pluralism and traditional conformity
as well as the extremes of both.

Rather than thinking of ‘Sin’ as something that is intrinsically wrong with us –
such that we are born in a state of depravity,
how about thinking of ‘sin’ as:
that woundedness, that brokenness, that ‘missing of the mark’
which is nobody’s fault and somebody’s fault, and everybody’s fault
and basically the sum of all the things that go wrong in life.

The Son of God, then, steps into the middle of all of that to ‘save’ us, but how?
How could that be so without breaking the laws of nature at every turn,
or showing favoritism for some according to religious membership
or riding into town to blow it all up or burn it all down?

The Son of God shows up as a bridge.

He shows up straddling the abyss like a Colossus with a cup of blessing...

Christ shows up like one of us – and like any of us,
he had challenges to deal with...

He was born to a poor woman – on a cold night in a stable,
and born early, so, he had to put up with the stigma of scandal.

He grew up Jewish in a tough Samaritan neighborhood
and he was expected to follow in his working-class father’s footsteps.

Whatever disadvantages he had, they served to ground him
as a person who could relate to others amidst the difficulties that they face.

But those difficulties also pushed him to excel,

bringing out his gifts and talents – and prompting him to a life of purpose.

His insights – both God-given and through the Jewish legacy of prophetic literature,
allowed him to claim his identity and mission as

healer, teacher, wonder-worker, and... Savior of the world.

From the stories in the Gospel that tell us about him,

we encounter the attributes of God’s character

as one who heals us in body, mind & spirit; as one who teaches wisdom;

as one who inspires awe – and even playfulness;

and as one who is self-giving for the sake of others.

Just as the nature of God was revealed in Jesus Christ, Christ shows up in us.

Christ shows up in our words & deeds when we take the part of

the Good Shepherd(ess) or the Good Samaritan or as the Theotokos.

Willard, p. 4

‘Theotokos’ is a fancy title in Greek for Mary the mother of Jesus,
and it literally means, ‘God-Bearer’.

We are asked to be God-bearers.

We are asked to pick up and bear our own cross, following Christ’s example,
When we do, Christ shows up through us.

But if we don’t pick up our cross of responsibility,
Christ moves on to someone who will...

On November 9th, 1989,

the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed,
and a chain reaction of events of liberty followed –
including the release of Nelson Mandela from a South African jail.

I thought seriously that Christ’s return was at hand.

The world had been given a rare opportunity –

but in retrospect, I believe we as a world, fumbled and did not recognize it.

Soon after those remarkable events of 1989,

the Gulf War erupted with ‘shock and awe’ against Saddam Hussein
to free Kuwait, though this set the stage for future wars –
now, in our time in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere.

We had opportunities for a better world back then in 1989,

and though bad actors have seeped in to fill political vacuums,
we must be ready for such a time again for Christ to show up.

For such a time when Christ shows up,

we have to be ready to do our part to be open & affirming of justice & peace
for the Holy Spirit to co-create with us
that Beloved Community that is possible...

Though we can’t count on

Rory Calhoun or any one person alone to get us out of the fixes we’re in,
we can count on Jesus – who counts on us to do our part.

It is then, that even one person

can make a difference for the good of all...

Amen

Our lesson today from 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

which is believed to be the first letter of the Apostle Paul.

From this text, we know that the early Church expected to see the return of Jesus Christ soon...

¹I don't need to write you about the time or date
when all this will happen.

²You surely know that the Lord's return will be as a thief coming at night.

³People will think they are safe and secure.

But destruction will suddenly strike them like the pains of a woman
about to give birth. And they won't escape.

⁴My dear friends,

you don't live in darkness, and so that day won't surprise you like a thief.

⁵You belong to the light and live in the day.

We don't live in the night or belong to the dark.

⁶Others may sleep,

but we should stay awake and be alert.

⁷People sleep during the night, and some even get drunk.

⁸But we belong to the day.

So we must stay sober and let our faith and love be like a suit of armor.

Our firm hope that we will be saved is our helmet.

⁹God doesn't intend to punish us,

but wants us to be saved by our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁰Christ died for us, so that we could live with him,

whether we are alive or dead when he comes.

¹¹That's why you must encourage and help each other,
just as you are already doing.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 21:25-36 [CEV]

[Jesus said,]

²⁵ Strange things will happen to the sun, moon, and stars.
The nations on earth will be afraid of the roaring sea and tides,
and they won't know what to do.

²⁶ People will be so frightened that they will faint
because of what is happening to the world.
Every power in the sky will be shaken.

²⁷ Then the Son of Man will be seen,
coming in a cloud with great power and glory.

²⁸ When all of this starts happening, stand up straight and be brave.
You will soon be set free.

²⁹ Then Jesus told them a story:

When you see a fig tree or any other tree
³⁰ putting out leaves, you know that summer will soon come.

³¹ So, when you see these things happening,
you know that God's kingdom will soon be here.

³² You can be sure that some of the people of this generation
will still be alive when all of this takes place.

³³ The sky and the earth won't last forever,
but my words will.

³⁴ Don't spend all of your time thinking about eating or drinking
or worrying about life.

If you do, the final day will suddenly catch you

³⁵ like a trap. That day will surprise everyone on earth.

³⁶ Watch out and keep praying that you can escape all that is going to happen
and that the Son of Man will be pleased with you.

³⁷ Jesus taught in the temple each day,
and he spent each night on the Mount of Olives.

³⁸ Everyone got up early and came to the temple to hear him teach.