

Aesop's Fable #210:

There was once a young Shepherd Boy who tended his sheep at the foot of a mountain near a dark forest. It was rather lonely for him all day, so he thought upon a plan by which he could get a little company and some excitement. He rushed down towards the village calling out "Wolf, Wolf," and the villagers came out to meet him, and some of them stopped with him for a considerable time. This pleased the boy so much that a few days afterwards he tried the same trick, and again the villagers came to his help. But shortly after this a wolf actually did come out from the forest, and began to worry the sheep, and the boy of course cried out "Wolf, Wolf," still louder than before. But this time the villagers, who had been fooled twice before, thought the boy was again deceiving them, and nobody stirred to come to his help. So the wolf made a good meal off the boy's flock, and when the boy complained, the wise man of the village said:

"A liar will not be believed, even when he speaks the truth."

The boy who cried wolf – even if you've never read Aesop's fables, I'm betting you've heard the idiom before.

Today I feel more than a little like that boy.

This is now my fifth year as a pastor, my fifth time preaching during the season of Advent, which means for the last five years I have stood in front of a group of God's people calling out the warning: Jesus is coming soon! Be prepared!

Year after year you come rushing out when you hear my warning cry, like those villagers in the fable. You stay vigilant with me for the four weeks of Advent, "Yes, Jesus is coming soon, we are going to be prepared." But year after year Advent comes and goes, Christmas ends in a flurry of activity, the new year begins and low and behold... no second coming. The warnings of Advent fade away... only to be brought up again next December: Jesus is coming soon!

I've only been doing this little song and dance routine for five years, Pastor Adam's has been at it for almost 30 years, and some of you have heard the warning cry of Advent, heralded by God's messengers much longer than that.

And if Aesop was on to something, and I think he was, there is a very real danger you and I face... the very real danger of having this warning, "Jesus is coming soon" fall on deaf ears because you've heard it all before. Year after year after year you have heard God's messengers take up the cry of John the Baptist: "Jesus is coming! **Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him!**" but year after year after year life goes on as it always has. There is no second coming and the constant warnings that Jesus is coming *soon* begin to paint me and every other messenger of God a liar... you probably wouldn't come out and call us liars, but maybe you just don't take us quite as seriously when we warn you to get ready because Jesus is coming soon.

I get it, because It's the exact same for me.

I intellectually know that Jesus is going to come *soon* because he tells me so. I intellectually know what Peter tells us today – that his coming is going to be like a thief, he is going to come unannounced and when we least expect him.

But I've got to be honest with you, even though I am hearing that crystal clear warning again this Advent, I'm having a hard time mustering any real urgency in how I live my life. I intellectually know that Jesus is going to come soon, could be today or tomorrow, but in actuality I live my life as if tomorrow will be the same as today, just like today is the same as yesterday.

I've heard that Jesus is going to come *soon* so many times in my life that I've built up a pretty robust tolerance to it. It is easy for me to ignore that warning because like Aesop's fable – a liar is not believed, even when he speaks the truth and even though I would never call God or his messenger's liars, you can only enthusiastically run out to fight off the wolves so many times... especially when you've seen neither hide nor hair of any wolves.

I'd be willing to bet the farm that it is the same for you too.

Think about it.

Peter describes for us what it looks like to seriously live as if Jesus could come again at any minute (Verses 11-12): **Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed it's coming...** (and again in verse 14) **So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this (the second coming of Jesus), make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.**

Peter says that someone who doesn't just intellectually know that Jesus is coming again "soon", but actually lives like it will be holy, and godly, making every effort to be found spotless and blameless. How many of us does that describe?

There is a simple test you can give yourself to assess your Peter-encouraged readiness. Ask yourself this simple question: If you knew that Jesus were coming tomorrow, what would you do today?

If you knew for a fact that Jesus was going to come tomorrow, how would that affect the way you treat other people? How would it affect the way you prioritize your life? How would it affect the way you budget your time, energy, and money?

I don't think it would take you very long at all to come up with a long list of things you would want to get done if today was the last day before Jesus came to judge the living and the dead... and I'd bet the farm that that list would be quite different than what you will actually end up filling your time with today.

I call this living with End Times Urgency – the belief that Jesus could come at any second. Living with End Times Urgency has limitless applications. Just simply asking yourself the question: what would I do or say or think right now, what would my priorities be today, if I knew for a fact that Jesus was coming tomorrow?... simply asking yourself that question brings a whole list of concrete examples of what Peter is talking about when he says we should be holy and godly, making every effort to be found spotless and blameless.

Asking that simple question also brings into focus just how much of a tolerance we have built to the warnings of God’s messengers like John the Baptist.

I’ve acted as God’s messenger for five years now and I can already feel the warning becoming stale on my lips... I feel like that boy in Aesop’s fable and I can empathize with you if you hear the warning today and think to yourself: I can only enthusiastically run out to fight off the wolves so many times... especially when I’ve seen neither hide nor hair of any wolves.

Friends, this is exactly what Peter is addressing today.

Just before the section Pastor Adams read a bit ago, Peter wrote this: **First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”**

There are going to be people in this world who scoff at God’s messengers like me and say, “Pastor, you and God have cried wolf one too many times.”

And the truth is, in each of us there is that same doubting voice... you keep promising me Jesus is going to come soon. Where is he? Can we really be expected to live with End Times Urgency when day after day, year after year, the warning goes unrealized?

Peter’s answer... a little bit of teaching, and a lot of encouraging.

First, the teaching:

Peter prepares the way for the Lord by reminding us of some important facts.

I know it seems like God is taking his sweet time but don’t forget, God works on a different time table than you and I. God isn’t slow in keeping his promise because he experiences time differently than we do. And if you stop and think about it, that makes sense. It should come as no surprise that the God who knows everything that has ever happened, because he was there, and everything that will happen, who has existed from eternity and will exist into eternity defines “slowness” differently than we limited by time and intellect humans do. “Don’t let that surprise you. God is not lying when he says he is coming soon and here we are 2000 years later and he hasn’t come,” Peter says.

Little bit of teaching: It is a fact, God reconns time differently than we do. God is going to come soon, and he is going to come like a thief. Live accordingly.

And we, who have heard all this teaching before, think: Easier said than done...

But here is where the encouraging comes in.

Notice, first, what Peter doesn’t do. Read that section from 2 Peter again, there is not a single threat in these verses. There is not a single “or else” in this entire section.

Without downplaying the seriousness of sin – particularly the sin of ignoring God’s warning to be ready for him to come – Peter knows that if he is going to do the important work of preparing the way for the Lord, preparing hearts for the second coming, what they need most is not the threats of the Law “be prepared, or else”, what they need is encouragement.

We are looking forward to that day, Peter says.

Now why would we look forward to Jesus’ coming – especially when, based on my track record, if he does come back in my lifetime it is all but guaranteed that he is going to catch me *not* living with End Times Urgency?

The answer, Peter says: **In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth.**

Peter says, “Yes, there are a lot of potentially scary things about Jesus’ second coming” – that whole destroying by fire bit – “there are a lot of potentially scary things **but in keeping with his promise we are long forward to a new heaven and a new earth.**”

Which begs the question, “What promise?”

Did you know what we call *the gospel* (the good news that Jesus died to take our sins away), Martin Luther and the other Reformers often just called *the promise*? For Luther *gospel* and *promise* were interchangeable.

The gospel is nothing less than the promise that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation – not your sin, not your unpreparedness for Jesus’ coming, not even the very fires of Judgement day can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The implications of living with End Times Urgency, of asking that simple question about how we would behave if we knew Jesus were coming tomorrow may be vast – but even more amazing and vast are the implications of God’s promise, the promise he seems so slow in keeping.

This world may be about to be destroyed by fire, but that is not your end, Peter says. Instead, you get the promise. You get the new heavens and the new earth that God will create after the old earth has been destroyed. You get to live with your God forever. Nothing will stop him from loving you.

So, Peter says, since that promise is yours, since nothing can take that away, what kind of people will you be?

2 Peter is not a threat. Advent (this season where we talk about Jesus coming again) is not a threat. It is a promise. A promise that prompts a question: How are you going to thank God for the gift of the promise? The promise is yours, no if's, and's, or but's about it. How will you live as children of the promise? That is the real End Times living – not under the threat: love me more urgently or else, but living under the promise, I love you, how will you love me back?

It turns out the role of God's messengers is quite different than that of the boy who cried wolf. John the Baptist, Peter, Pastor Adams, and I do not exist simply to cry "watch out". No the primary purpose of God's messengers has always been, and will always be to point to the promise and say, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Similarly, for you, the message of Advent is not simply, "Watch out, be prepared, or else!" No the primary message of this season has been and always will be to point you to the promise. We have a God who does not want anyone to perish. We have a God who came once already as a baby, who would live for us, and as a man who would die for us so that we could look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

Friends, Jesus is coming soon. He is bringing the heaven he promised and secured with him. Now what kind of people will you be as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming?

A good place to start is asking yourself that question: If Jesus were coming tomorrow, what would I want to do today to show him how thankful I am that the promise is mine?

A life lived in anticipation of the promise is far different than a life spent chasing away wolves.

Come quickly Lord Jesus!

Amen.