

Come to the Lord

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

December 29, 2024

Readings

Isaiah 60:1-7

- 1 Arise, shine; for your light comes,
and the glory of Jehovah has risen on you.
- 2 For behold! The darkness shall cover the earth,
and dense darkness the peoples;
but on you Jehovah shall rise, and His glory shall be seen upon you.
- 3 And the nations shall walk to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
- 4 Lift up your eyes all around, and see;
all of them are brought together,
they come unto you; your sons shall come from far off,
and your daughters shall be cared for at your side.
- 5 Then you shall see and flow together;
and your heart shall dread and be enlarged;
for the crowd of the sea shall be turned to you,
the host of the nations shall come to you.
- 6 An abundance of camels shall cover you;
the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah;
all of them from Sheba shall come;
gold and frankincense shall they carry;
and they shall bring tidings of the praises of Jehovah.
- 7 All the flock of Kedar shall be brought together to you;
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;
they shall go up on My altar with good pleasure;
and I will adorn the house of My adornment.

John 1:1-5, 9-13

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² This was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made by Him, and without Him was not one thing made that was made. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵ And the Light appears in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

⁹ He was the true Light, which enlightens every man who comes into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and His own did not take Him in. ¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave authority to become the children of God, to those who believe in His name, ¹³ who were born, not of bloods, nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.

Revelation 3:20

²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

True Christian Religion 89

Divine order prescribes that a person should prepare themselves to receive God; and as they prepare themselves, so God enters into them as into His dwelling and home. That preparation is accomplished by acquiring knowledge about God and the spiritual matters which concern the church, thus by means of intelligence and wisdom. For it is a law of order that in so far as a person approaches and comes near to God, which they should do entirely as if of themselves, so far does God approach and come near to them, and conjoin Himself with the person in the person's interiors.

Introduction

- My family and I used to live in South Africa and we would sometimes come back to the East Coast of the United States for a visit.
- When we did that some family members would fly from elsewhere in the United States to come see us.
 - One time when I thanked them for doing that, I remember one of them saying, “If *you guys* have travelled the majority of the distance between us, then we can go to the effort to travel the remaining distance to meet up with you.”
 - I appreciated them doing that and I’ve tried to follow that same principle of being willing to travel to see people who have done the majority of the traveling to get to where I am.
- I bring this up because we’re talking today about coming to the Lord.
 - And, to put it mildly, the Lord has already done the vast majority of the work – the traveling – to come to connect with us.
 - The question is, are we willing to go to the effort to cover the last bit of ground between us to come to the Lord?
 - And the next question is, if we are willing, how do we come to the Lord?
 - We’ll get into those questions in a little bit.

The Lord Coming to People and People Coming to the Lord

- First, I want to invite you notice how prevalent the themes of the Lord coming into the world and people coming to the Lord are in the Christmas story.

Stories

- Can you think of any stories of people coming to the Lord?
 - The shepherds, who, after they had been told what had happened by the angels, “came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger” (Luke 2:16).
 - The wisemen who saw His star in the East and came to worship Him (Matthew 2:2).
 - Simeon, who “came by the Spirit into the temple” and saw the Lord (Luke 2:27).
 - Anna, who “coming in that instant... gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).
- These stories are very familiar to us and so we might forget how different they are from anything that came before them.

- If you look in the Old Testament for instances of the Lord coming to people or people coming to the Lord it's all much more distant.
- You get to the New Testament and it suddenly becomes a normal thing for people to come to the Lord – to see Him, to talk with Him, to eat with Him, to touch Him, to be healed by Him, to be blessed by Him.
- The God of the universe chose to become "God With Us" in a new way and, ever since then, we have been able to come to our God in a much more direct way.

Carols

- There are also lots of Christmas carols or hymns that talk about the Lord coming or people coming to the Lord and that reflect on the significance of His coming.
- For example,
 - "O Come, O Come, Immanuel"
 - "O Come, All Ye Faithful"
 - "O come, little children, O come, one and all,...."
 - "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King...."
- There are also phrases in hymns:
 - "Glory! For the Lord is come, Jesus makes the earth His home."
 - "...but the gift all gifts excelling, Christ Himself is come."
 - "He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all,...."
 - "O come, let us adore Him..."
 - "Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray."
 - "Come and worship, come and worship, worship ye the Lord our king."
 - "No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the Lord will enter in."
- So the Lord coming and people coming to the Lord is a big theme at this time of year, in the season of Advent.
- When we think about this theme, there's a very important principle that we need to keep in mind: we have to choose to come to the Lord.

We Have to Choose to Come to the Lord

- We read about this principle in our lesson from the teachings of the New Church.
- Here's how the same principle is expressed in another passage from *True Christian Religion*:

- [N]o conjunction that is a conjunction is possible unless it is effected reciprocally and mutually.... This conjunction is effected by a person's approaching the Lord, and the Lord's approaching them, for it is a sure and immutable law, that so far as a person approaches the Lord so far does the Lord approach that person. (100)
- Here's that same passage again in a different translation:
 - A real partnership is not possible unless it happens mutually and reciprocally. This partnership comes about as we move closer to the Lord and the Lord moves closer to us; for it is a fixed and unchangeable law that the closer we move toward the Lord, the closer the Lord moves toward us. (*True Christianity* 100)
- It's like the Lord has travelled a million miles to be with us and He's even built the house that we're living in but, rather than barge into our house to be with us, instead He comes all that way and then stands at the door and knocks.
 - We have to choose to invite Him in.
 - We have to choose to come to the Lord, to connect with Him, to conjoin with Him.
 - He will never force us to.
 - We have to choose.

Why?

- Why is this a law of the universe?
 - Why did the Lord set things up this way?
- From a theological and philosophical point of view we can see that, if we had no choice in the matter, then we would have no free will.
 - It wouldn't really be a relationship: it would be slavery.
- We can also think about it in terms of other relationships in our lives.
 - If someone would only hang out with us because we forced them to, that would not feel good or healthy at all.
 - What makes us feel loved and connected with someone is when they *choose* to do things with us and for us.
 - When they *choose* to spend time with us.
 - When they *choose* to listen to us.
 - When they *choose* to help us with something.
- The Lord wants us to *choose* to be in relationship with Him and to *choose* to work to be in closer relationship with Him.
 - And, as much as we choose to try to come closer to the Lord, He will choose to come closer to us.

The Prodigal Son

- This principle is beautifully illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son or the wasteful son.
- You might remember that, in this parable that the Lord told, a young man goes to a far country and wastes all the inheritance money that his father gave him.
 - That young man eventually decided to go back to his father, admit that he had sinned, and ask if he could be one of his father's hired servants.
 - And "when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him" (Luke 15:20) and then called his servants to bring him clothing and to throw a party because his lost son had come home.
- This is a good picture of how our Heavenly Father feels about us choosing to come to Him, even when we have messed up.

How Do We Come Closer to the Lord?

- Now, let's talk about *how* we come closer to the Lord.
- One passage says this:
 - The Lord is constantly present with every human being, the evil as well as the good. No one would be alive if the Lord were not present. Only when we let Him in, however – that is, believe in Him and do what He commands – does He come in. (*True Christian Religion* 774)
- There are two parts of this: believing and doing.

Believing

- On the believing side of things, part of the point is that what we believe about the Lord matters and affects our ability to connect with Him.
 - This is true of our other relationships too.
 - If we're married, what we believe to be true about our spouse can hugely affect our relationship with them.
 - And the same goes for our relationships with our children, our friends, our co-workers.
 - And so, in all of those relationships and in our relationship with the Lord, we need to go back to the source to make sure that what we believe about that person is actually accurate.
 - We need to spend time listening to them to understand what they're really like.

- Our recitation from Hosea chapter 6 included this line: "Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord."
 - Yes! Let us do that.
- One good way to do that is to come to church.
- Another good way is to read the Word for yourself.
 - You can picture that the door that the Lord is knocking at is the cover of the Word.
 - Will you open the door and let Him in?
- Sometimes people get more time to read books during the holidays.
 - Reading one of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – would probably take you between 2 and 3 hours to read or to listen to as an audio book.
 - Maybe you're gearing yourself up to try to get back in the habit of reading the Word every day in the new year.
 - That would be good.
 - Reading just one of the gospels for a start would also be good.
- More broadly it seems like each person could use to have some private time with the Lord.
 - Growing up you may not have had much choice in whether you went to church or attended chapel or religion class at school.
 - Choosing, for yourself, to spend time with the Lord can be very powerful.
 - That could be through reading His Word.
 - Or praying when you first wake up in the morning or when you are going to sleep.
 - Or going on a walk by yourself and talking to the Lord.
 - Some way of choosing to open yourself up to the Lord.
 - You might even ask Him, "Lord, what do I need to do to come closer to You?"

Doing

- This gets us into the doing part of inviting the Lord into our lives.
 - And what counts as believing versus doing can get kind of blurry because the one leads into the other, if you're doing it right.
- But the point is to be inviting the Lord, not just into your head and thoughts but also into your heart and actions.
- In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the King says to the sheep who represent good people, "I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me."

- And the sheep ask Him, “[W]hen did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?”
- And the King replies, “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:31-46)
- One of the major ways that we might come closer to the Lord is by coming closer to His children.
 - Working to have better relationships with other people is working to have a better relationship with the Lord.
 - If we ask the Lord, “What do I need to do to come closer to You?” It might well be that His answer will have to do with how we are interacting with other people in our lives.

What If We Don't Want to Come to the Lord?

- But what if we don't want to come to the Lord?
- Relationships are hard.
 - We might want to push the Lord away and tell Him to stay out of our business.
- And there have been plenty of people who rejected the Lord.
 - We read in John, “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not take Him in” (1:10,11).
- And the Lord told a parable about a certain man who provided a great supper and invited many people, but when he sent his servant to tell the people who were invited to come because everything was ready, they all made excuses why they wouldn't come (Luke 14:15-24).
 - We've been invited to the Lord's feast.
 - Are we willing to go or will we make excuses?
- Maybe we don't want to go be with the Lord because we know that we've been doing things that we shouldn't be doing.
 - In John 3 we read, “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (3:19,20).
 - Or maybe we just know that going to the Lord would ask more from us than we feel like giving.

- The Lord did say to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24).
 - Maybe I'm not feeling like denying myself and taking up my cross, thank you very much.
 - I've got other things that I want to do.

- If you're feeling those kinds of feelings in your lower self, here's something else for your lower self to consider: you might get left out of something good.
 - When we reject the Lord's invitation to come to His supper we might feel sure that nobody is going to go to His party and it's going to be lame.
 - But actually, in the parable, lots of people end up going to the party.
 - The man who is giving the supper wants people to come and so he sends out His servants to invite other people until His house is full.
 - In the reading from Isaiah 60 we hear about people from all over streaming into Jerusalem to be with Jehovah.
 - All those people are going to get to be with the Lord and be blessed by Him.

- Tell your lower self that other people are going to get good things that you could have had if you got up and started moving.
- And, in reality, being at the Lord's party is going to be way better than your current situation.
 - In the parable of the prodigal son, when the son was penniless, destitute, and wishing he could eat pigs' food, it says that he finally "came to himself" (Luke 15:17).
 - What a great phrase!
 - What does it take for you to come to yourself or to come to your senses?
 - When the son came to himself, he realized that it was worth the cost to go back to his father.
 - It is worth the cost to go back to our Heavenly Father.
 - We might want to keep Him at more of a distance but, if we can have the courage, to instead invite Him in to those spaces where we have the most hurt and confusion and pain, it will be better to have Him there with us.

Coming to the Lord is a Moving Target

- One final thought about coming to the Lord.
 - If people had wanted to come to where Jesus was, it would have been a moving target.
 - He didn't just stay in Bethlehem or Nazareth or Jerusalem.
 - Once He began His public ministry, He was moving and He invited people to become His disciples and follow Him as He went.
 - To come to the Lord is to be going somewhere – to be following someone who is on a mission.
 - As it says in "Once in Royal David's City", "...and He leads His children on to the place where He is gone."

- The Lord chose to come into this world because He loves people and He wanted to save them be more closely connected with them.
- And He loves you and He chooses every moment to come as close as He can to you.
 - Will you choose to open the door and work to come closer to Him?
 - ¹⁷ And the spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.
 - ²⁰ He who testifies these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly, amen."
 - "Yes, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:17, 20).

- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.