

# **“En Garde!”**

A sermon preached by  
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**TEXTS: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 and Luke 21:25-28**

## **1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

*How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day, we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.*

*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

## **Luke 21:25-28**

*‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’*

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Two fencers stand at the ready. They assume the First Position, heels together, one foot at a ninety-degree angle to the other and the sword hand pointed downward and to the side, away from the opponent. Next comes the salute. Each fencer raises his epee, pointing to the opponent, raising the guard to the chin, the blade in a vertical position. The blade is again pointed at the opponent, then swept down and to the side. Each fencer assumes the ready position. The director of the match cries, “En Garde!” and the match begins. “En Garde!” is, in essence, “Be ready!” Something is about to happen. Be prepared.

Advent is the season of preparation, the time when we look back to Jesus’ Incarnation, even as we prepare for His coming return. That return, what is often called the *Parousia* or Second Coming, was part of the essential beliefs of the infant Christian Church.

Early disciples knew and affirmed the past. Many of them had lived the past they affirmed. They had walked with Jesus. They believed Jesus had come from God. They told and retold the story of how God had sent the Messiah into the world to proclaim God’s Kingdom. His miraculous birth was told only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. His life was recorded in all four of the Gospels. Jesus taught, healed, did miracles, and instructed his disciples. Accused of blasphemy by the Jews and insurrection by the Romans, Jesus willingly laid down his life by dying on the cross for human sin. Then, three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead. That was the past. That past changed the future for every believer.

Early believers affirmed this future even as they struggled against persecution and oppression in everyday life. Despite what they had endured at the hands of the Roman Empire and Jewish leaders, they trusted in Jesus’ promise to return. This was their faith. This was their hope.

The second Scripture lesson this morning is from 1 Thessalonians. The First Letter to the Thessalonians is recognized as Paul's very first letter in the New Testament. It was written, scholars believe, around 52 AD. As such, the Epistle probably predates all four of the Gospels. Paul writes to encourage these early believers.

They live in an uncertain world. He wants believers to love God and to love and support one another in this uncertain world. Their lives are to be different from the lives of those unbelievers around them. They are to be holy in an unholy world, shining lights in a world of moral darkness. Hear once again Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians from the last line of today's reading. *"And may he [God] so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."* If you are going to be blameless, you must be ready. This was the message. "En Garde!"

Within twenty years of Jesus' death and resurrection, there is an established belief in Jesus' return. Jesus promised. In Acts 1:11, Luke reports the Ascension of Jesus. The angels say to the disciples, *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."* The disciples expected that Jesus would return very soon. He would return with those saints who had already died.

There was a problem, though. Jesus did not return soon. This is the reason the Gospels were written.

Initial growth of the Christian faith came by word of mouth and personal testimony. Then those who had been eye-witnesses to Jesus' teaching and miracles began to die off. The early Christian community thought that it was critically important to write down what these disciples remembered before all these saints were gone and their testimony lost. They did this just in case Jesus' return was further delayed. Not really understanding why the promise was not fulfilled, the Church never stopped believing in Jesus' promised return. Even the writing and sharing of the Gospels was a way to be prepared.

When we recite the Apostles' Creed, we hear echoes of this early belief in Christ's return when we say, *". . . he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead."* Such belief did not find in the promise of Jesus' return a simplistic rescue from tribulation and persecution. These apostles and believers had experienced tribulation and persecution from the time recorded in the first chapter of the Book of Acts until the fourth century. It is said that many who gathered at the Council of Nicaea in Asia Minor in 325 AD, bore in their bodies the marks and scars of torture. Some had only one eye, some bore the marks of hot irons on their arms and legs, and some were missing fingers and toes.

From the time of Jesus forward, the message to the church was to stand firm despite persecution and to always be ready. Be prepared! Justin Martyr (100-165 AD), one of the early Church Fathers, expected that the church would go through a period of tribulation when the Antichrist would be revealed. He writes, "He shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us Christians, who, having learned the true worship of God from the law, and the word which went forth from Jerusalem by means of the apostles of Jesus, have fled for safety to the God of Jacob and the God of Israel." (Justin Martyr, chapter 110)

Today's Scripture lesson from the Gospel of Luke speaks of the end of all things. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus says that a time will come when the stones of the Temple will not stand one upon another. They will all be thrown down. The Temple will be destroyed. His disciples ask for a sign when such things will take place.

Jesus' then begins to admonish them not to be led astray. They must be prepared. They must be on guard. They must be alert. Why? Some will come claiming to be the messiah. Some will say that the time of the end is at hand. There will be wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines,

and great signs in the heavens. It will be a time when fear can become the prime motivator for many people. Easy answers will be offered. People, even the saints, may be deceived.

The phrase that strikes me in today's reading from Luke is, *"People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."* Scary stuff!

I remember reading Hal Lindsey's The Late, Great Planet Earth when I was in high school and being fascinated by biblical prophecy. At the same time, I was petrified by the interpretation of world events offered in Lindsey's book. At the time, I was not a Christian. Reading of the end of all things evoked feelings of fear, apprehension, and judgment.

When I accepted Christ, those feelings changed. Faith replaced fear. Hope replaced terror. Joy replaced apprehension.

This passage catches those emotions. When Jesus came the first time, He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to bring salvation. When He comes the second time, He will come in judgment of the world and vindication of believers.

This is what Jesus says. *"Then they (those who faint from fear and foreboding) will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:27-28)* It is the same event that is described. Jesus returns. Only the reaction is different. Some will faint from fear and foreboding. Saints are to lift their heads in anticipation of coming redemption. What will the reaction be for you? How will you respond? Will you respond in faith? Will you respond in fear?

Over the years, I have watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* perhaps forty times. Everybody loves the Peanuts gang and you all know the story. It is Christmastime and Charlie Brown knows that he should be happy. He is not. He is depressed. He knows that the commercialization of Christmas is the problem.

The Peanuts gang illustrates the enormity of the problem. Lucy complains because she never gets what she really wants for Christmas, just toys, and clothes, and stuff. Charlie Brown asks what she really wants, and she responds, "Real estate." Snoopy decorates his doghouse in hopes of winning the cash prize in the neighborhood Christmas decorating contest. Charlie's sister, Sally, asks Charlie to write a letter to Santa. She claims to have been good all year, so she has a long list. To simplify things for Santa, she tells him that he can just send money, preferably tens and twenties. You know Charlie Brown's classic response, "Good grief!"

After a visit to Lucy, the amateur psychiatrist, Charlie Brown agrees to direct the Christmas play to get out of his depression. Throughout the entire cartoon, there is a running theme. Everyone tries to separate Linus from his security blanket. As you remember, the blanket goes everywhere with Linus. It is tied to his identity. The rehearsal for the Christmas play is a disaster. Charlie gets a tree to be the centerpiece of the play. Charlie's tree is pathetic, losing most of its needles. Everyone makes fun of the tree, only deepening Charlie's already depressed mood. In frustration, Charlie says, "I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is about?"

Linus offers to tell Charlie Brown the true meaning of Christmas. This is the highlight of the cartoon. Linus recites the Christmas story from Luke totally from memory. When he gets to the passage about the angel's appearance to the shepherds, Linus says, *"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."*

You must watch the screen carefully to catch the nuance within the animation. I missed it the first twenty times I watched the cartoon. Linus holds his blanket throughout the cartoon.

Snoopy can't take it away. Lucy can't talk him out of it. However, when Linus says, "Fear not!" as he tells the Christmas story, he drops his blanket.

The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears . . . forever. Jesus is God's perfect love. In 1 John 4:18, the Apostle writes, "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.*" That is why we can raise our heads and look up in anticipation of Christ's return. Our redemption is drawing near. Perfect love returns for those Christ loved enough that He shed his blood for them. There is no judgment. There is no punishment to anticipate. There is only perfect love returning for His own as He promised.

As Jason Soroski, writer and musician, comments on this scene in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, "The birth of Jesus frees us from the habits we are unable (or unwilling) to break ourselves. "The birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping so tightly and learn to trust and cling to Him instead."<sup>i</sup>

At the end his recitation of the Christmas story, Linus picks up his security blanket again and says, "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." The next time we see Charlie Brown's Christmas tree is when he takes it outside the school where the children rehearse their play. He borrows an ornament from Snoopy's heavily decorated, prize-winning doghouse and the tree sags, unable to support the weight of the big red ball. Charlie Brown gives up in frustration and heads home.

The rest of the Peanuts gang finds the tree. Linus straightens the trunk and the branches. He remarks, "I never thought it was such a bad little tree. It's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love."

For the second time, Linus gives up his blanket. He wraps it around the base of the tree. The rest of the gang raids Snoopy's doghouse and decorates the tree. They gather around the tree and the cartoon ends with everyone singing, 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!' The blanket is left, wrapped around the base of the tree.

In one 30-minute animated cartoon, Charles Schulz got it supremely right. Christmas is about the coming of God into our world in the form of an infant. God's actions move us from fear, to faith, to love. As Jason Soroski concludes, "Linus and friends have moved from speaking truth and hearing truth into a deeper place of worship, where they finally respond to that truth, much like those shepherds who were instructed to "fear not" so very long ago."<sup>ii</sup>

En Garde! Be Prepared! Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! This is the mystery of the faith we hold and celebrate.

An old saying records that fear knocked at the door, faith answered, and no one was there. Fear not! Perfect love casts out all fear.

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory! AMEN!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/just-drop-the-blanket-the-moment-you-never-noticed-in-a-charlie-brown-christmas.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/drop-the-blanket-the-rest-of-linus-s-story-from-a-charlie-brown-christmas.html>