

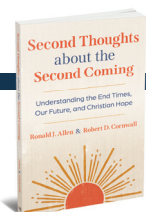
Second Thoughts about the Second Coming

PREACHING THE SECOND COMING FROM THE CHRISTIAN YEAR AND THE LECTIONARY

Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall

When clergy in Eurocentric congregations in long-established denominations—such as United Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—get together for lunch, the question sometimes comes up, “How do you choose the biblical texts on which you base your sermons?” One minister says, “Free selection. I pick my own text every week to give the Spirit maximum freedom to guide the sermon.” Another minister reports preaching through a book of the Bible from start to finish. “This *lectio continua*, ‘continuous reading,’ immerses the congregation in the biblical book from which the preaching texts come.” From another corner comes, “I always have a sermon series going. You can cover a subject more thoroughly that way.” Beyond such answers, for a long time, Bob and Ron have noticed that a large swath of ministers in the historic, mainline denominations respond, “We preach from the lectionary. It gets you all over the Bible, including some places you would not choose to go on your own.”

This latter statement needs a little expansion. Strictly speaking, such ministers speak not only from the lectionary but from the perspective of the Christian Year within which the Revised Common Lectionary is embedded. The Christian Year and the Revised Common Lectionary are much more than treasure houses of resources for worship and preaching. The Year offers a specific theological interpretation of a Christian worldview. The lectionary provides texts that are intended to be portals through which preachers bring a theological reflection on the major theological themes in the Christian Year. When working from the lectionary, the preacher does not simply “preach the text” by itself but preaches the text in the context of the lectionary readings for the day and theological themes of the day from the perspective of the Christian Year. The minister who catches the spirit of the Christian Year explores the main theological themes of the season through one or more of the biblical passages the lectionary assigns for each Sunday.



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The preacher considers how the passage illumines the congregation's understanding and appropriation of the theme of the season and the day of the Christian Year.

On the First Sunday of Lent, for instance, the lectionary assigns texts containing versions of the temptation of Jesus for all three years (Year A: Matt. 4:1–11; Year B: Mark 1:9–15; Year C: Luke 4:1–13). The preacher does not simply preach on the story of the temptation assigned for the day. The preacher's responsibility is to help the congregation probe how the congregation's encounter with the text helps the congregation move toward the theological disposition of Lent as part of the liturgical journey toward Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and the Day of Resurrection.

The Apocalyptic Focus of Christian Year and the Lectionary

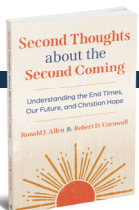
The christocentric point of view of the Christian Year assumes that God worked through Jesus to bring salvation to a sin-stained world. From a broad theological perspective, the movement of the seasons of the Christian Year interprets the dawn and development of salvation by offering an interpretation of the ministry of Jesus. Yet the Christian Year does not follow the narrative of Jesus from birth through life to death and resurrection but is arranged according to theological topics that become the lenses through which the congregation interprets the story of Jesus: Advent, Christmas and Epiphany Day, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost Day, and Ordinary Time, which eventuates in the climax of the Christian Year: Reign of Christ.

We develop the end-time focus of this arrangement more fully in the material that follows, but for now, we call attention to the fact that the Year begins with a call to prepare for the second coming (especially the first two Sundays of Advent) and ends by pointing to the expectation that Jesus will come again to complete the work of redemption (Reign of Christ). The Christian Year as a whole is intended to help the congregation live faithfully and hopefully toward the return of Jesus, which will bring the final and full manifestation of the Realm of God.

While the theological scaffolding of the Christian Year is end-time in nature, the lectionary texts placed within this scaffold come from all the major theological families of the Bible. Four of the five major theological groups are not apocalyptic: Deuteronomistic, Priestly, wisdom, and Hellenistic Judaism. By bringing texts from these many nonapocalyptic texts into the Table of Readings, the Christian Year and the lectionary place them in the service of the apocalyptic theology that shapes the Year. Per above, the preacher can ask of each text:

- How does the end-time perspective affect our interpretation of this text?
- How does this text relate to the overarching apocalyptic worldview enshrined in the Christian Year?

At another level, the presence of the different theological families in the Christian Year and the lectionary honors the diversity of theological perspectives in the Christian house. The



presence of such diversity opens the door for dialogue in the congregation about which perspectives are more or less promising conversation partners at particular moments in history and particular cultural contexts.

Many preachers and congregations, consciously or unconsciously, have end-time mind-sets. They believe Jesus is going to return to wrap up the present age and launch the culminating era of the Realm of God. Some believers, such as the premillennialists, are wedded to a specific timeline. Others are more open-ended with respect to the timing of the end event. But still other Christians downplay, reinterpret, or even turn away from apocalypticism. Such Christians formulate their understanding of God's ultimate purposes in other ways. We cite two examples.

Within the Bible itself, impulses toward realized eschatology permeate the Gospel of John. Many Christians in the East think of God's ultimate purposes less as a replacement of the present world (facilitated by a violent interruption of history) and more as a restoration of the world to conditions that existed before the fall (Gen. 3). Process theologians reject the end-time scenario but find that apocalyptic elements in the New Testament invite the congregation to consider ways in which they can partner with God to jointly pursue a future with the characteristics of the Realm of God.

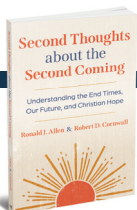
Preachers and churches with such alternative ways of thinking about God's ultimate purposes can still use the Christian Year and the lectionary by both critiquing elements of the second-coming scenario and reinterpreting the seasons and days of the calendar of the Christian Year in light of their own deep theological convictions. Such ministers and communities also have the option of stepping away from the Christian Year and the lectionary and creating a calendar and Table of Readings according to their theological commitments.

We now highlight some apocalyptic elements in the Christian Year and in the way the lectionary is configured to support the Year. Per the remarks just above, readers need to sort out how their own theological convictions regarding God's ultimate purposes lead them to interact with the end-time emphases of the Christian Year and its deployment of the Revised Common Lectionary. Whatever one's approach, preaching in the context of the Christian Year and the lectionary should honor the otherness, the distinctiveness, of the apocalyptic perspective and state clearly one's similarities or differences.

In these remarks, we concentrate on the relationship among the Gospel readings, the Christian Year, and the lectionary. These passages set the major concerns for the Sundays of the Year. Moreover, the Christian Year and the lectionary offer such an abundance of texts from the other parts of the Bible, it would require an entire book just for this purpose.

Advent

The English word "advent" derives from a Latin word for "coming." In the early twenty-first century, congregations often take the "coming" to refer to the coming of the Christ child at



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Christmas. The focus of the season of Advent is, consequently, on preparing for Christmas. While this dimension of Advent is a part of the meaning of the season, as we point out above, the larger theological and liturgical framework is the final advent (coming) of Jesus at the end of the history of the current world to replace this broken, idolatrous, unjust, exploitative, violent world with the Realm of God and its qualities of authentic worship, justice, mutuality, and peace.

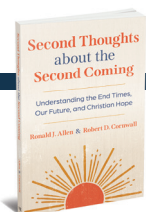
This larger view of the “advent” as the second coming is revealed in the fact that each year, the readings for the First Sunday of Advent are from the end-time discourses in which the first three Gospels picture Jesus trying to prepare the disciples to live faithfully in anticipation of his return (Matt. 24:36–44; Mark 13:24–37; Luke 21:25–36). The broader message of these selections is that the readings for the entire story of Jesus (as narrated with their different nuances in each of the first three Gospels) are intended to guide the disciples in faithful life and witness toward that climactic event. The Gospel readings for the Second Sunday of Advent reinforce this impression by focusing on John the Baptist as an end-time prophet calling people to repent in anticipation of the consummation of history (Matt. 3:1–12; Mark 1:1–8; Luke 3:1–6).

Christmas and Epiphany Day

Preachers and congregations sometimes treat Christmas as if the events associated with it are ends in themselves. Indeed, we hear sermons, hymns, and other Christmas materials speak as if salvation is accomplished at Christmas. The sense that Christmas is an “end” is reinforced by the wild commercialization of the Christmas season in North America. However, from the viewpoint of the Christian Year, if Advent frames the purpose of the Year from a second-coming perspective, then Christmas is only the first step in the movement from the broken present toward a redemptive future.

For Christmas Day and the following Sundays, the Christian Year brings together texts from traditional apocalyptic theology (Matthew and Luke) as well as from the Gospel of John. From the standpoint of end-time theology, the narratives of the birth of Jesus reveal that Jesus is God’s agent who will (1) announce that God is moving history toward the apocalypse and the climactic appearance of the Realm of God, (2) invite people to join that movement through repentance, and (3) instruct the community regarding how to live in the present based on the qualities of the Realm. The ministry of Jesus embodies many aspects of the Realm, especially the miracle stories and Jesus’ relationship with people on the edges of the community. The stories of the birth of Jesus authenticate Jesus as the end-time prophet. Hence, they add authority to the notion that the second coming is ahead and that the congregation should repent and live and witness following the vision of the Realm.

On Christmas Day each year, the lectionary appoints the prologue to the Gospel of John as the Gospel reading (John 1:1–14). The presence of John 1:1–14 reminds preacher and listeners



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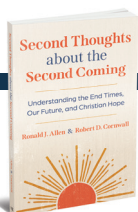
that the work of the Word in the Fourth Gospel is to reveal the true nature of God, the possibility of realizing eternal life (life according to the values and aims of God) in the present, and the way to God beyond death. This text is important to many preachers and communities because it affirms that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). While this notion is pivotal to the doctrine of the incarnation, and although the doctrine of the incarnation has an important place in many Christian theologies, that doctrine is not essential to the larger apocalyptic framework of the Gospels or the Christian Year. The presence of John 1 in the lectionary reminds the preacher and congregation that the end-time way of thinking about Jesus is not the only one. The Gospel of John, as we noted in chapter 2 in the book proper, interprets the story of Jesus from the perspective of Hellenistic Judaism, which shifts the eschatological emphasis from an end-time scenario to one of more realized eschatology.

The preacher is tempted to mush the end-time and realized perspectives together, but in so doing, we lose the distinctive features of each. Rather than collapse the second-coming Jesus and the realized-eschatology Jesus into one homiletical narrative, the preacher could set out these viewpoints, and compare and contrast them in search of elements that are especially meaningful to the congregation in the present.

Every year the lectionary assigns the visit of the three magi to the infant Jesus to Epiphany Day (Matt. 2:1–12). This visit anticipates Gentiles embracing the grace and purposes of God and becoming a part of the movement toward the Realm of God. The coming of Gentiles into the church prefigures the great reunion of the human family in the final materialization of the Realm. From an apocalyptic perspective, the inclusive church is more than a matter of welcome; such coming together is a demonstration of end-time reality already reaching into the present. It is hard to imagine a theme that is more germane to the social context of early twenty-first-century North America.

Ordinary Time between Epiphany Day and Ash Wednesday

Christmas and Epiphany Day identify and authorize Jesus as God’s instrument. The biblical texts associated with these occasions point toward the heart of Jesus’ vocation as manifesting the Realm, but the texts assigned to Ordinary Time between Epiphany Day and Ash Wednesday go much farther in explaining the message and mission of Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels state this mission in apocalyptic terms. Mark 1:15 (Year B) is quite explicit. “The time is fulfilled, and the [Realm] of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Note similarly Matt. 4:12–17; Luke 4:14–30.) The call of the preacher during this season is to help the congregation develop an understanding of the theological content of the Realm of God: its value and practices, Jesus as announcing and embodying it and inviting people into it, how those who hear the message can faithfully respond to it.



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From an apocalyptic point of view, the transfiguration is an interesting case (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–9; Luke 9:28–36). This text, which occurs on the last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration Sunday) as a way of climaxing the season as well as a pointer to Lent, centers in the vision of the transfigured Jesus, that is, Jesus appearing for a moment in a resurrection body, and the body in which he will return for the second coming. The transfiguration comes after Jesus reveals that he will suffer and be put to death because of his witness to the Realm of God and that the disciples will also suffer for the same reason. All three Synoptic Gospels use the narrative of the transfiguration to give the disciples (and the churches to which Mark, Matthew, and Luke wrote) a vision of the future of Jesus (and, by implication, their own futures) so that they will endure in witness in the present.

When the lectionary assigns passages from the Gospel of John to this part of Ordinary Time, the preacher can help the congregation recognize points of similarity and difference between the Johannine vision and the end-time vision and can help the community figure out how their own understandings of God’s ultimate purposes relate to these biblical perspectives.

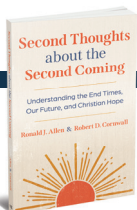
Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week

Ash Wednesday signals the move from Ordinary Time into Lent. The biblical texts are the same for Years A, B, and C. Ash Wednesday is quintessential in its association with an apocalyptic point of view in the Ash Wednesday call for repentance. In the immediate liturgical context, Ash Wednesday leads the congregation to think of Lent as, in part, a season of repentance.

Over the centuries, Christian focus in Lent has often been on repenting from sins we commit as individuals. More recently the focus has widened to include participation in sin that is more communal in nature. Moreover, sin is increasingly understood as violating the values and practices of the Realm of God. Among other things, preaching in Lent is an opportunity to invite the congregation to turn away from violations of the characteristics and behaviors associated with the Realm of God and to turn toward the qualities of the Realm—individually and communally.

Some of the Gospel texts appointed for Lent lead directly to such considerations. For example, the story of the temptation occurs on the First Sunday in Lent (Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:9–15; Luke 4:1–13). Other texts directly allude to the importance of repentance, such as the Lukan passages in Lent in Year C. When passages do not speak overtly of repentance, the preacher might invite the congregation to identify with characters in the text who think and act in ways that are contrary to the Realm of God and invite listeners to consider what actions—including repentance—might bring characters and congregation into consistency with the Realm.

The reasons for repentance reach their nadir during Palm/Passion Sunday, Holy Week, and Good Friday. In the last days of Jesus’ life—as narrated in the Gospels—the various forces that conspire with one another to put Jesus to death are nothing less than complicit with the



attitudes and ways of life of the old world. They profit from their places in the broken world; the replacement of the old age with the new threatens their power; they think they will be more secure in their hold on power if they kill the one who threatens their security. Hence, the rulers of the old age conspire to murder Jesus to protect their own self-interest.

Preaching about the death of Jesus is complicated by the fact that the Gospel writers exaggerate the Jewish role. Seeking to undermine the authority of Jewish leaders in their later communities, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John retroject caricatures of Jewish elders into the Gospels, especially in the days leading to the betrayal and murder of Jesus. The church has often magnified this theme. Complicity with this theme is something for which many preachers and congregations need to repent.

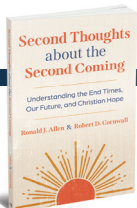
Easter Day, the Sundays after Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost Day

Bob and Ron grew up on Easter preaching that saw the resurrection of Jesus as pointing to the possibility that people could live beyond death. Sermons celebrated the possibility of an afterlife for the individual, often in the form of a nonphysical soul in heaven. Preachers depicted heaven as a sphere in which people live forever as spiritual beings but otherwise pretty much live as they live in the world now, except that the unhappy parts no longer exist. Indeed, some sermons depicted heaven as little more than an improved version of the present.

An apocalyptic interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus includes the ongoing life of the individual but in a new, resurrection body. The new body is made of material that does not decay. This perspective also includes a new world that is transformed so that the values and practices of the Realm of God replace the attitudes and actions that so distort the realm of this world.

The resurrection of Jesus is the definitive sign that the movement toward the Realm is under way. The rulers of the old age exert their maximum power: they murder Jesus on the cross. But God takes this moment of apparent supreme weakness and transforms it into an occasion where the extent and character of God's power is fully evident. In his earlier ministry, Jesus announced the Realm, invited people into the community moving toward it, taught its main traits and how to respond, and demonstrated its partial presence through miracles and the reunion of the broken human family.

The resurrection is the definitive sign that everything Jesus said and did in his earlier witness is true. Indeed, Paul describes the resurrection as the "first fruit" of the inhabitants of the Realm of God (1 Cor. 15:20). The first fruit to appear on a plant in the farmer's field shows that the plant is indeed bearing fruit and alerts the farming crew to prepare for the harvest: the fruit is coming on; the time to be in the field is now.



The church often acts as if the resurrection is the main point of the story of Jesus. And it does communicate the critical point that the power of life has more power than the forces of death. But this affirmation is only the beginning of the message to which the resurrection points. God elevates the risen Jesus to heaven, where Jesus sits at the right hand of God. From there, Jesus will return and complete the work that is foreshadowed in the resurrection.

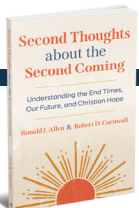
The resurrected Jesus shows that God has the power to replace the things that are. However, that replacement will occur only when Jesus comes a second time from heaven. From this point of view, the resurrection is a sign of assurance: the community can live through the struggles of the present because they can believe the Great Metamorphosis is ahead.

All four Gospels are told from the perspective of the resurrected, ascended Jesus. In a certain way, the Gospels do not simply narrate things from the life of the Jesus as a past historical event but tell the story of Jesus in such a way as to communicate that his resurrected presence continues to be in the world in ways similar to how the Gospel writers present him in their narratives. On the Sundays after Easter, the Gospel texts provide the preacher with the opportunity to reflect with the congregation on the significance of the resurrection, and on where continuing signs of the resurrection help the congregation recognize and respond to the Realm.

From the point of view of Luke–Acts, the central work of the Spirit that pours over the community on Pentecost Day is to continue the power of the resurrection in the world, especially through the church (but not limited to the church). The Spirit is itself both a sign and an agent of the presence of the Realm through the continuing power of the resurrection. The church can do what Jesus did because the same power that operated in Jesus now operates through the church. Moreover, during the long delay between the time of the church and the return of Jesus, the Spirit assures the church that the church can continue its life and witness through the long and difficult interim period.

Ordinary Time between Pentecost Day and the Reign of Christ

A guiding purpose for preaching in the lengthy period of Sundays between Pentecost Day and the Reign of Christ—the last Sunday of the Christian Year—is to encourage the congregation to explore the presence and further manifestation of the Realm of God through the guidance of the story of Jesus. The Gospel material assigned for this long season gives the preacher semicontinuous readings that bring multiple aspects of the Realm into view. It offers abundant material that illumines the life of disciples. It frankly and painfully exposes the congregation to challenges to the witness to the Realm that come from outside the community of faith as well as challenges that come from within. It illustrates both faithful and unfaithful responses to the Realm and pushes the congregation to choose faithfulness or face punishment. The preacher



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hopes to help the community become more alert to the presence of the Realm, to identify ways in which the community can participate with the movement and manifestation of the Realm, and to strengthen the community's confidence in its abilities to make its way toward the second coming, whether understood literally, figuratively, or in some other way.

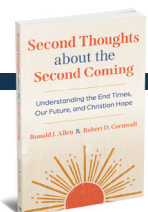
The final Sunday of the Christian Year puts the defining end-time stamp on the Year: Reign of Christ Sunday (formerly called Christ the King). The complete and eternal reign of Christ is the goal toward which the entire Christian Year points. The Reign of Christ is actually the Realm of God with Christ acting as God's representative. A fundamental purpose of the Year is to sustain the congregation through the vicissitudes of life until Jesus returns as the cosmic ruler.

In Year A, the readings for the last Sundays of the year come from Matthew 25, Jesus' final apocalyptic discourse. Indeed, the culminating reading is the parable of the Last Judgment, which both assures the congregation of the destiny of the faithful and reminds the community of the eternal punishment awaiting those who do not live according to the standards of the Realm of God so clearly spelled out in this passage (Matt. 25:31–46).

The lectionary adds an important theological subtlety to Year B. While the lectionary invokes the apocalyptic discourse from Mark 13 before the final Sunday, for the Reign of Christ the lectionary reading is John 18:33–37, where Pilate interrogates Jesus with the question, "Are you the King [Ruler] of the Jews?" Jesus eventually says, "My kingdom [realm] is not from this world." Preachers often take this statement to mean, "My realm does not take place in this material/physical world. My realm is a nonmaterial/spiritual one that takes place in the heart." Such a simple material/nonmaterial contrast is not what John has in mind.

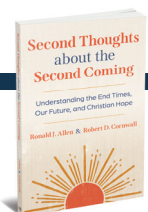
The word "world" for John has a special meaning. It refers to the present sphere of existence, which is one of death, hate, falsehood, blindness, hunger, slavery, division, and unbelief. The work of Jesus is to offer those who are trapped in the world the possibility of living in the sphere of heaven, which is a sphere of eternal life, love, truth, sight, fullness, freedom, oneness, and belief. For John, the realm is expressed fully in heaven, but in the mode of realized eschatology characteristic of the Gospel of John, believers can partially experience it in the present as they await complete access to it in the unmediated presence of God. The Fourth Gospel does not give a prominent place to the second coming, but John wants the community to adopt a faith and mission similar to those who expect the second coming. John wants the community not to settle for "the world" when in the present they can live in ways that anticipate the heavenly sphere.

In Year C, the lectionary makes a move similar to the one in Year B. The lectionary invokes Luke's version of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse as the year winds down but turns to Jesus on the cross on Reign of Christ Sunday (Luke 23:33–43). This scene contrasts two modes of reign and asks listeners to choose between them. In the Lukan church of the first century, listeners would have already been familiar with the story told in Luke–Acts. They would have known that Jesus is resurrected and that God had sent the Holy Spirit to empower the church to continue the ministry of Jesus.



So, in Luke 23:33–43, they witness the nature and work of the Roman Empire, the most far-reaching force field tied to the old age. Apropos of our remarks earlier, the empire demonstrates its greatest power by putting Jesus to death. By contrast, listeners know that the Realm of God is present through Jesus. Jesus famously hangs between two criminals. In this moment of greatest suffering and extremity, Jesus is faithful to the values and practices of the Realm of God. Instead of lashing out at the empire, Jesus enacts mercy by assuring one of the criminals, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” The listener can choose whether to identify with murderous Rome, which murders the innocent, or Jesus and the Realm, in which the guilty are forgiven and welcomed into Paradise.

To return to a motif we have mentioned earlier, while the Christian Year and the lectionary present the story of Jesus with a second-coming scenario in mind, the preacher can adapt the emphases of the seasons to the theological convictions that are at the heart of the preacher and congregation. Of course, such adaptations require careful explanation so that members of the congregation understand why they are taking place, and what is gained and lost along the way.



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