



WESTMINSTER  
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# **The Days Are Surely Coming**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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## The Days Are Surely Coming

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*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land (Jeremiah 33:14-15).*

Hollywood legend Maureen O'Hara died last month at the age of 95. She starred in many films, including some with her friend John Wayne, and millions of people will see her again this season in the 1947 Christmas classic *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*. A native of Ireland, she remained a devout Catholic all her life, and she's quoted as saying, "I'm terrified of that day when I enter the gates of heaven and God says to me, 'Just a minute.'"

Whether she was really terrified or not, I don't know, but Maureen O'Hara seems to have understood two things that not everyone remembers. First, that there would come a day when she had to meet her Maker, which is to say that Hollywood legends, like everyone else, have to die one day. And second, she knew she should not take God for granted. God is gracious and merciful, yes, but God also holds us accountable for the way we live, so we ought to live as though we'll have to square up with God some day for everything we've done, and for everything we've failed to do. The famous actress knew that was something to be taken seriously.

Every year in America the season leading up to Christmas seems to get more and more silly in some ways. This year's big controversy so far has to do with the notion that Starbucks' coffee cups are part of a "war on Christmas" because they don't show enough of what really matters about the holiday, which some people seem to think is

mostly about reindeer and Christmas trees anyway.

The sillier the season gets, the more some of us are reminded why Jesus had to come two thousand years ago, and why we look forward to his coming again. No one knows when Christ will come, despite the claims of some to have an inside scoop on that subject, but “the days are surely coming,” as the prophet Jeremiah says, when God will raise up a branch from the line of David, and he will bring justice and righteousness to all the land.

Our need for Christ is so pervasive that it’s hard to know where to begin describing it. The other day I read that a police officer in Mountain View, California, pulled over a car that was going too slowly, 24 miles per hour in a 35 mile per hour zone, and impeding traffic. When the officer went to give the driver a ticket, it turned out that there was no driver. It was one of those experimental Google cars that can move around all by themselves, so there was no one to give a ticket to. That struck me as a kind of metaphor for our time, when we know that some of our human creations are making a mess of things, but we can’t even tell who should get the ticket.

The news is full of troubling things, and if you let it get to you, you could spend all your days being anxious and afraid. I’ve said before, and won’t belabor the point now, that fearmongering for profit is big business in America and apparently all around the world. There are people who want to stoke our fears for all sorts of self-serving reasons.

But I love the Christian faith in part because it is, literally and figuratively, the best of both worlds. It promises a world to come in which there is no mourning or crying or pain anymore, for the former things will have passed away.

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But it also offers us the comfort and strength to get through the trials of this life with grace, the gratitude to enjoy the blessings God gives here and now, and the courage and love to face the darkest challenges and reflect the light of Christ by doing our best to make this world, too, a better place.

Faithful Christians take the world's needs seriously because we take God seriously, but we're not defeated or paralyzed by fear. We have too much hope for that, too much faith, too much love—not because of our own strength but because the Spirit of Christ fills us with those things. Those are Christmas gifts worth wanting.

I'm struck by some of the scripture passages chosen for the church's lectionary in Advent. The world wants to make Christmas all about eggnog and jolliness and buying stuff, but here's this text from Luke where Jesus says, after a long litany of troubles to come:

There will 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 what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

How does that fit with Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer and “the hap, happiest time of the year”? Are the people who pick the lectionary just a bunch of Scrooges, all “Bah, humbug!” when what the world really wants is mostly a big party to take its mind off its troubles for a while?

I don't think so. On the contrary, I think Christianity gives us the gifts we really need, if not always the gifts we think we want. All some of us want is a bit of “holiday cheer,”

a little merriment to last until the needles start to fall off the Christmas tree. But Jesus comes with gifts far greater than Santa could ever bring. As St. Paul says, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.” What the world needs now is love, as the old pop song said, and love is what the Son of God brings, because God is love.

The love that Jesus brings is so much more than a bit of holiday cheer. If we enjoy one another’s company, and the gifts of family and friends, and Christmastime brings warm feelings, of course that’s also a gift from God and we’re grateful for it. But Christ brings so much more than that. Christ comes to fill not the stockings hanging on the mantel but the empty spaces in our souls.

Jesus says, I am with you, whether your family and friends are here or not. I will strengthen you, whether you’re in the peak of fitness and health or struggling with some long illness. I love you whether you feel lovable or not. And don’t be afraid. No matter what they say on the news, don’t worry about the world, but do your part to make it better, and I will give you what you need to be an instrument of my peace and an agent of my redemption.

I read another story the other day about a man who died recently. His name was Jack Yufe. He was raised on the island of Trinidad, and later moved to California, where he ran a clothing and appliance store. His story was picked up on the news because he had an identical twin whose name was Oskar, but the twins were separated shortly after their birth in 1933. Their father was Jewish and Jack was brought up in that tradition in Trinidad, but their mother was Catholic and she took Oskar back to Germany, where he hid his Jewish background and joined the Hitler Youth at the age

of 12, as an act of survival.

Jack's wife, Ona, encouraged him to reunite with Oskar in 1954, and the first meeting did not go well between the twins, one of whom was raised to be a Jew and the other to be a Nazi. Later, in the 1970s, Ona read about what would become a famous study at the University of Minnesota concerning identical twins who were separated at birth. She encouraged Jack and Oskar to participate, and they discovered that they had all sorts of personal traits in common. The shared tastes in food and enjoyed playing the same kinds of pranks. They had the same gait when they walked, and they talked at the same rate, even though they spoke different languages.

They got to know each other through the two-decade study, though their relationship never lost its prickly edge, given the differences in the ways they were raised. Still, Jack said that Oskar's past was no longer an issue for him. "Children have no say in what they are taught," he said. "If we had been switched, I would have taken Oskar's place for sure."

There was a big debate in the 1970s about whether nature or nurture determines who we are and what we become, and the argument was fraught with all sorts of social implications. The answer turns out to be that both are important, and the nature vs. nurture controversy proved to be one more false dichotomy of the sort we humans always seem to conjure up to oversimplify the truth. The fact is, we're born with certain traits that have little to do with the way we are raised, but then we learn some things that can bring out the best or the worst of whatever potential we have.



Our families and the communities that nurture us have an enormous influence in shaping the people we become, which is another reason why the values we lift up in church are so very important. Those who like to dismiss “organized religion” overlook the critical importance of healthy spiritual communities in forming the better habits of our hearts.

“O my God, in you I trust. You are the God of my salvation,” the psalmist says. We trust in God because God is the source of all good things, and God alone is great enough to deliver us from all bad things. The days are surely coming, the prophets tell us, when God will make all things right, including the shape of our own souls.

In the meantime we wait, because waiting reminds us that it is God who saves us and we depend on God for our redemption as we depend on God for everything else. But in the meantime we also have work to do, because when Christ comes again he expects to find us about his Father’s business. There are people to care for, and an entire planet to care for, and God wants us to do our part.

Maureen O’Hara was right. We don’t want to arrive at the gates of heaven and have God say, “Just a minute.” We want to get there and be greeted by one who says “Welcome,” knowing that if we get there at all, it will only be by the grace of God, and because God will have given us the gifts we need to glorify God and make our own souls grateful and glad.



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