

**DECEMBER 4, 2016**

**ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**GALATIANS 3: 23-4:5**

**“IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME----AGAIN” Galatians 4:4**

Do you have a muff for this winter? If not, do you know what a muff is? A nice tube-shaped cloth thing-a-majig to put over your hands to keep them warm in winter. Seems like we seldom see them anymore, but I think they used to be more popular.

Back in the 1840s a muff caused a big religious controversy in Rochester, New York. At that time the Millerite religious movement, led by William Miller, was growing rapidly in the United States. There were Millerites in Cleveland back then, but I don't know how many.... William Miller said he had figured out when Jesus Christ would return to the world. He picked a certain date and promised it would happen. Many believed him and became very fixated on being ready for that day.

In Rochester, New York, the pastor of the Millerites was a man named Joseph Marsh. He strongly told the Millerites there that the world would end in October (which Miller had promised)---winter would never arrive that year because the world would end! He preached hard about this and his followers were convinced. Then in early October, just a couple of weeks before the predicted day of Christ's return, something shocked all the Millerites of Rochester. Word got out that Rev. Marsh had purchased for his daughter a pretty white muff to keep her hands warm in winter. An obvious problem here! Rev. Marsh said there wasn't going to be a winter---the world would end later in October! So why did he buy his daughter a winter muff? Didn't he believe what he himself taught? Many of the Rochester Millerites were pretty upset with Marsh, but then it didn't turn out to really matter----because Miller's predicted end of world date came and went and the world didn't end. The world stayed the same. The Millerite movement went into chaos, although there are still churches today that trace their roots back to that movement. Joseph Marsh ended up appearing a double fool----bought a muff to be used after the end of the world, and then was wrong about the date of the end anyway! (Thunder and Trumpets, David L. Rowe, Scholars Press, 1985, p. 125)

That story shows us why it's not good to predict when the world will end. But Miller and Marsh did have *one* fact right----Jesus Christ will come back to our world. Orthodox iconostases remind us that there are two comings of Christ to our world. The icon to my right shows a baby in its mother's arms----that is the Lord's first coming when He was born of the Theotokos. Then on my left is an icon of Christ showing Him in glory---as He will appear when He comes back the second time at the end of time. He came as a baby the first time. He will come the second time as king.

I was recently requested to use a sermon to explain our Orthodox teaching about Christ's return. So, this week and next, I will do a little two-week series of teaching sermons about our beliefs on this. It's good timing because we are now in the Advent season leading up to Christmas. During Advent, we prepare to celebrate Christ's first

Advent (coming) at the first Christmas. And we prepare ourselves to be ready for Christ's second Advent (coming) when He returns in the future.

When Christ came to our world the first time 2000 years ago, He brought here the Kingdom of God. The main theme of our Lord's preaching was, "The Kingdom of God is at hand". When Christ came, God's kingdom came, because Christ was both King and God. He revealed God to us. He defeated the devil and death and hell by His death and resurrection. But His final and complete victory is still in the future. That will take place when He comes back the second time.

When our Lord in the future comes back again He will bring the Kingdom of God to its final and complete fullness and victory. He will finish defeating the devil and death. He will raise all the dead from their graves. He will end this world as we know it by transforming into the wonderful New Heaven and New Earth promised to us in the Bible.

When will this happen? When will He come back? Well, the Millerites thought they could predict the day---that didn't work out too well. And plenty of others, including some pretty recently, have thought they could say when it would be. No one has gotten it right so far!

We just don't know when it will happen. And we *can't* know when it will happen. It will happen when the time is right according to God. In today's epistle reading from Galatians, St. Paul talks about how the time was right, in God's timing, when Christ came to the world the first time 2000 years ago. The apostle wrote in Galatians 4: 4-5---"But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman." Look at the icon here to my right and you'll see both the Son and the woman St. Paul is referring to. The birth of Christ took place when God knew the time was right, "when the time had fully come."

The fullness of time for Christ to come will happen again someday. God knows when that time will be. We don't know. We don't need to know. We can't know. Jesus Himself said we can't know----Matthew 24:36---"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." That's clear----only the Father knows. So we shouldn't focus on what year or day Christ will come back.

Many things make many think His coming may be soon. And it certainly could be. But some fixate too much on that---after all, there have been earlier times in history when many thought His return was about to happen. But not so far.....

So don't get caught up in predictions about when. Now that doesn't mean, though, that we should not be eager for that final day to come. We should be very eager and hoping that it will be soon! There was a common short prayer among the earliest Christians that is recorded in the New Testament. It's usually left in the original Aramaic language----"Maranatha". In English, it's "Lord, come". That is a good prayer for us to pray because we look forward to His coming. And we pray something very similar every day in the Lord's Prayer---"Thy Kingdom come."

We don't know when it will be, but we should be eager. And we should be ready.

There's an old story about a Saint (I don't know what Saint or where the story comes from) that's relevant to this. The holy man was hoeing in his garden one day when a man came along to chat with him for a moment. He asked the Saint, "If I could tell you for sure, absolutely certain, that Christ will come back today, what would you do?" The questioner assumed the Saint would say he would quick go on a last minute preaching

campaign, or start a special church service, or something very drastic. But the Saint replied, “If I knew Christ will come back today.....I’d keep hoeing my garden.” The Saint knew he was doing what God wanted him to do that day, so there was no reason to do anything different. He was ready.

We prepare for that final day by living for God, by doing what He directs us to do. When we do that, we’re ready.

Meanwhile, while we wait for that final day to come.....life and death go on. And if we die before Christ returns, then we as individuals go before God for our own individual Judgment Day. This preliminary judgment day, sometimes called “the particular judgment” is when we each stand before God after death. It is not the final judgment—that comes on the day when Jesus comes back and all who have ever lived stand before Him to be judged.

At this preliminary judgment after our individual deaths, we receive a preliminary judgment and receive a foretaste of either the final heaven or final hell. And in a state of a foretaste of either heaven or hell, we will await the day of final judgment when Christ comes back to this world. On that final day, we will receive our final judgment.

One of the reasons why we have memorial services for our departed loved ones has to do with this “time”, in between preliminary judgment at death and final judgment on the last day. During this “time”, those who have died wait for the final day. Our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Christ are already in a good situation, in that foretaste of the final glories that will come when Christ comes back. Their present situation is described in the words of the memorial service, where it is stated that they are in “a place of brightness, a place of verdure (meaning greenery, life, springtime), a place of repose, whence all sickness, sorrow, and sighing have fled away.” Sounds great! Yet, even in the midst of all that blessedness, they are eagerly awaiting something better---the even better life they will have in the future after Christ comes back, after the final judgment day.

Even the Saints, even the Holy Martyrs, are even now still waiting for something better to come in the future. They are with God now, they are greatly blessed, but even better lies ahead for them. In the book of Revelation, chapter 6, St. John describes how close the Holy Martyrs are to God---their souls are right underneath the heavenly altar! But St. John tells us that, even in that wonderful situation, they still cry out to God, “How long?”. Because they know a better life still is coming in the future. So when we pray for our departed loved ones, it is good to thank God for how He is blessing them...and to also pray that they will patiently wait for the even better future blessings God will give them on the last day.

*A side note here----- Another thing to consider when we think about this current time period in between Christ’s first advent at Christmas and His second advent at the end of the world.... Remember that the individual judgment we receive at our time of death is a preliminary judgment; we don’t get our final judgment until that last day at the end of the world. That fact has led to what we might call a “thread” in our Orthodox Tradition that has to do with the relation between those two judgments. In some of the writings about the lives of the Saints, there pops up an idea that is not an official teaching of the church, although apparently thought to be true by many Saints. Perhaps we could say it’s a*

*“holy maybe”. This idea stresses the preliminary nature of our individual judgment after death and puts forth the proposition that it might be possible for someone who gets a “bad” preliminary judgment to repent and change before the final judgment when Christ returns. If that’s the case, someone could be on the wrong side of the judgment after death, but be on the right side at the final judgment. Probably best to say we just don’t know for sure, but some Saints certainly have thought so..... But keep that in mind when you are wondering if you should pray for someone who has died and you are pretty sure that person is going to have a real tough time at his or her preliminary judgment. That Uncle Bob of yours who was a pretty nasty fellow, probably never said a prayer, lived a selfish life, maybe hardly believed in anything at all---your family has a memorial service for him and you wonder, “Why pray for him? He’s lost for sure.” Pray for him anyway---Uncle Bob hasn’t had his final judgment yet, just the preliminary one---who knows what could happen? Pray for him!*

And so now, as await the fullness of time to roll around once again as it did 2000 years ago when the Lord came the first time....we serve God, we pray for our departed loved ones, and we wait!

But one day the wait really will end! One day He will come back. And don’t worry that you might somehow miss the whole thing. Don’t worry, because He will come back very publicly and in great glory. No one can miss knowing. If you happen to be taking a nap, you’ll wake up!

That is what we will look at next Sunday in part 2 of this little 2-week teaching series. We will look at the events connected with our Lord’s return.

What a day it will be! Let me close with Jesus’ own description of that wonderful day in Matthew 24: 29-30----“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken: then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

That day of “great glory” is approaching---we’ll look at it closely next Sunday. May our Lord come quickly!

