Years ago, I was having a conversation with my high school German Teacher (may God rest her soul) about how one changes when living abroad for extended periods of time. One funny thing we noted was that we both became more American. What we meant by this was that by living in another culture we found ourselves identifying more with our own culture. Some of this came from the realization that things which annoyed us when we were at home were not really as bad as we thought and through the contextualizing nature of another culture, we were able to appreciate what it was that we had. However, some of this feeling of being “more American” did not have benign or altruistic origins. It was more reactionary in nature, and often expressed itself in terms of not doing what the foreign culture was doing. If the foreign culture were X we were going to be Y – we were Americans by God. And this impulse to differentiate which played out for me on a small scale when abroad I think is actually part of a larger phenomenon that happens anytime, we are surrounded by people who do things a little different than we do. Somewhere deep in our psyche we seek ways to show the world that we are star bellied sneetches in a world of plain bellied sneetches. And while I understand the impetus for this and recognize that there can even be good reasons for it, sometimes in our pursuit of differentiation we may discard things that are worthwhile.

And quite honestly, I think a fair bit of the denominational strife we see in Christendom has more to do with the desire to distinguish than it does with real and heartfelt theological differences. And one of those areas where this occurs has to do with one of the themes of Advent which is the second coming of Christ. We hear about it today in 2nd Peter when we read, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” Just so we are clear the phrase “day of the Lord” in this context means Second Coming. And so now let’s get to the divide within Christianity about the Second Coming. In some churches, like the Episcopal Church, we don’t talk about it much, if at all, while in other churches, like many Baptist and so-called Bible churches, they talk of little else. And it is my opinion that some of our neglect of the subject is fueled by a desire to distinguish ourselves from the churches that obsess over it. We tell ourselves (and others) that we are not like those Christians, the ones who read the *Left Behind* series and listen to preachers who yell a lot. We have much better taste. And honestly I think for many Episcopalians there may even be some embarrassment about not just the people who talk a lot about the Second Coming but about the doctrine itself. I mean it all sounds so judge-y and medieval. We prefer a much more domesticated God who does not make big scenes. I mean how would your typical NPR listener respond to us if they knew that we believed in something so gouache as God separating the sheep for the goats? No, we like to be able to tell our friends that we are Christian, but that we are the right kind of Christian, the kind that is not embarrassing in decent society.

Now I know that some within the Christian world have gone way too far with Christ’s Second Coming, cooking up theologies about the event that would be unrecognizable to the Apostles, but this does not mean that we can ignore the whole thing. Doing so would be akin to not believing that Kennedy was assassinated because Oliver Stone made a kooky conspiracy nut movie about it. In our effort to be star bellied sneetches we cannot dismiss an entire doctrine of the Church, a doctrine upon which the season of Advent is built. And the reason we cannot do this is because it is part of God’s plan. If you remember, inherent within the Christian understanding of how the world works is the concept of the fall of man. What this means is that this world as presently configured is not the way God intended for it to be, because it is separated from Him. Through Christ’s death, resurrection and creation of the Church a way was created for us to be with God, but we must always remember that this current reality is not the final act of the play. The Church as it presently exists is like the Ark. It is the boat on which we can climb on board to be saved from sin and death, but the ultimate goal is for there to be nothing from which we need to be saved. There will be a new heaven and a new earth that functions in the way it was intended at the creation and for this to happen Christ will need to come again. And if you don’t believe me just look at what we say in Eucharistic Prayer A, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” We are currently living in the second sentence, Christ is risen, but we are waiting to live in the third sentence, the one where Christ comes again.

Here is a way to think about it that might help. Think of an environmental calamity like a flood, fire or hurricane. In such situations people lose their homes and are often put up in temporary quarters, perhaps a camp or a hotel. Now the place where they are put up is better than the hole in the ground that was once their home. In their temporary quarters they have a roof over their head and running water, but the thing is this is not a long-term solution. It is better than what they had, but it is not what it should be -- a rebuilt home. We are currently living in a camp or at the Super 8. It is not terrible, but something still needs to be done. And that something is what Peter is talking about today. He is telling us that things are not done; things are going to get better. But as always there is a hitch. Christ’s second coming is not just something that God does but rather it also puts some responsibility on us. We have to be ready for the change. We have to be ready to leave our FEMA trailer and go to our new home. And the way that we do this is explained in the next paragraph of what Peter says, “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”

God is promising to do all the heavy lifting, but we have to have a heart that is prepared for him to come. If I may exhaust my analogy, we have to have the moving boxes ready. God will pick them up and deposit them safely in the new location, but when he shows up the place can’t look like my old fraternity house after a Ben-Hur party. The Second Coming is the completion of God’s project to restore creation to its original goodness. If you think of all the beauty and wonder of the Christmas Season, realize that this is only a FEMA trailer and that the final act of the play is something more glorious and wonderful and all that we need to do is be ready. So in this Season of Advent prepare him room and then let heaven and nature sing this day and forevermore.