

Question:

Is there a second coming when Jesus will suddenly show up?

In our class on the Gospel of John, Fr. John Behr says the Nicene creed has been misinterpreted: That "Who will come again" actually is better translated "again coming."

He explained, "His coming in the name of the Lord is what we see on the Cross. And this is the judgment, and what we will have in the end is nothing other than this."

Can someone explain more what he means here?

Response:

Such a mystery here! More than we can grasp or articulate! But like the first disciples, those of us who grew up in apocalyptic evangelicalism—watching for the rapture, the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation and Armageddon to commence, probably next week—we longed to know when and how "the Second Coming" would come. Indeed, we were taught that faithfulness entailed convincing ourselves that "any day" meant:

Coming again, Coming again,
May be morning, may be noon,
May be evening and may be soon!
Coming again, Coming again;
O what a wonderful day it will be –
Jesus is coming again!

Steeped in Patristic Orthodoxy as he is, it must be difficult for Fr. John to even think that way vicariously without hearing how bizarre our world was. For me, three decades later, it's getting harder too. But still, I recall how we were taught to meet every challenge to our dispensational delusion through these words of Peter:

... you must understand that in the last days, scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. "Where is the promise of his coming?" they will ask. "Ever since our fathers fell asleep, everything continues as it has from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:3-4).

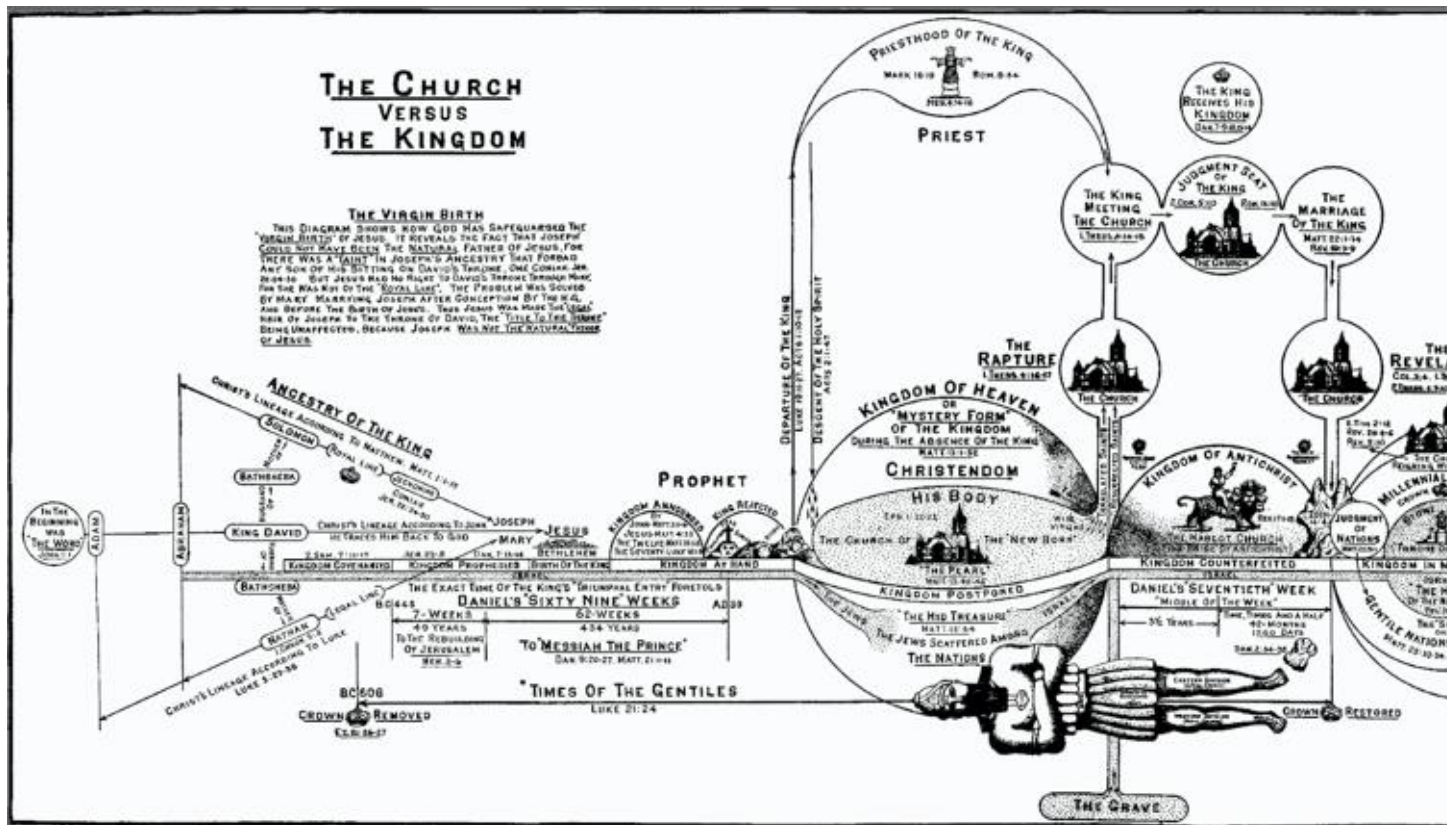
Well, two facts are pretty plain to me now:

(1) the dispensationalism we 'left behind' has repeatedly proven itself fruitless and frequently dangerous, and (2) Fr. John cannot be credibly dismissed as a scoffer. Rather,

he's likely the best steward we know of the Johannine tradition. With that in mind, how do we answer your question? Here are my suggestions:

1. Begin by letting go of 'apocalyptic' expectations & the proof-texts we used to prop them up.

We've finally been learning to associate 'apocalypse' in Scripture more with an *unveiling* rather than as the cataclysmic end of all history. So, we need to start with the hard work of expunging from our minds any association between Christ's 'coming' and our dystopic visions of End Times prophecy. That is, when you hear the Nicene phrase, "He shall come again with glory" (again coming – *palin erchomenon*), wipe the whiteboard completely clean of all those Sunday night revivalist time-line charts and start completely fresh. Well, one last glance as we wave good-bye:



But what about all those verses we used to calculate the End? We can't just set them aside, can we? Of course not. But neither should we read them through 19th-century theological lenses that repeatedly hoodwinked us. Claiming to clarify the unfolding of world events, these teachings grossly distorted our image of God and his Christ! He became the terrifying, vindictive, and violent deity who was charging us toward Ragnarök. Many also internalized the trauma as religious PTSD.

Instead, responsible New Testament scholarship has been moving toward a studied conviction that the Book of Daniel (chapters 2, 7, 8) tells us straightforwardly that the cosmic imagery of his apocalyptic dreams reveal God's perspective concerning referents in the real world of political empires and events that are about to unfold before the first readers' eyes. Daniel explains that his beasts represent historical empires in succession familiar to his people.

Likewise, in what we call "the little apocalypse" or Olivet Discourse of Jesus (Matt. 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21), our Lord sweeps away Hal Lindsay's whole futurist schema in a single sentence, if taken seriously: **"Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened"** (Matt. 24:34). The events he forecasts are about to happen and are fulfilled in what would be the 'end of the world as they knew it' (#R.E.M.)—that is, the dissolution of the entire political and religious world order centered around Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin, the temple, its priesthood, sacrificial Judaism, and the entire city would be razed by A.D. 70.

So, too, the proposal by Kenneth Gentry, Peter Leithart and others (including Behr) have established a growing minority report that the Book of Revelation faithfully follows this same pattern, was written before A.D. 70 and that its message anticipates the fall of Jerusalem rather than the future and final "Second Coming" of our semi-cultic indoctrination. If true, then lucky you: you missed the Great Tribulation by about 2000 years ... though, tragically, many millions since then have not escaped as brutally oppressive empires continue to rise and fall throughout history. To those who face similar horrors today, the message abides: Jesus is Lord, worship him, remain faithful, for with martyrdom comes the rebirth of resurrection.

2. Completely reimagine the 'coming of the Lord.'

Once we start to step out of our old end-times mindset, what fills the void. We need to completely reimagine what is meant by the 'coming of the Lord,' past, present, and future.

a. Past—the Paschal Mystery

As Fr. John says, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" refers to the ascent of Christ to Jerusalem for his climactic Passover and climaxes in his enthronement on the Cross—we find that the cruciform Judgment Seat is also the Mercy Seat of the "again coming One."

Note: "the Cross" for the apostles is a synecdoche that encompasses the entire Paschal drama. I.e., they don't fragment Holy Week into independent elements. "The Cross" in

which Paul glories includes it all: from the Triumphal Entry to Gethsemane, from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, on to the Ascension and Pentecost. In fact, John gathers all these events into and around the Cross and the truth of the Lamb slain.

b. Present—Ecclesial Encounter

Further, for Christ to be ‘the again coming One’ means that every believer continues to experience Jesus’ union with humanity whenever we encounter the Risen Lord. I say ‘ecclesial’ as this encounter is not merely a privatized pietism but focuses on the Triune Love in which we participate together as the living Temple and Table of the Lord. We continually encounter ‘the again coming One’ in the Body of Christ gathered for Eucharist, in the fellowship of spiritual siblings who embody Christ’s presence to me and ‘in the least of these my brethren’ in whom I delight to discover the Priceless Pearl.

This is where I fear American Christianity (Evangelical Nationalism?) has failed us. When the Great Deconstruction rolled through, it turned out *not* to be true that those who left their churches still identified with Jesus. Most (86% in one poll) did not. How is this possible? It is only possible, in my estimation, if (1) their faith tradition failed to facilitate an authentic living connection with Christ OR (2) if the deconstructionist spirit is so powerful as to re-narrate and negate our encounters as bygone delusions. That needs further consideration.

c. Future—Apokatastasis / the Cosmos Transfigured

YES, BUT!! ... The inner dispensationalist that still lurks demands to know: Is this it? Does history and its tragedies continue forever, uninterrupted? Is there no final resolution? And if there is, what will that look like? We’re pretty obsessive about this, all the more so in tumultuous times.

Knowing this, I asked Fr. John whether we can still affirm the *apokatastasis panton* (Greek for “the restoration of all things”—Acts 3:21), that death and evil will come to an end, and that ultimately, “God shall be all and in all”—or “everything to everyone” (1 Cor. 15:20-28). His answer summarized was a somewhat surprised and surprising “Of course!” ... as in, “Isn’t it obvious?” Christ *will* draw *all* people to himself (John 12:32).

But Behr’s Patristic model also demands that we think of the “always coming One” as descending from eternity rather than remaining stuck in our old temporal, date-setting frameworks. This is easier said than done, but fear not, there is an ancient and beautiful way.

The Transfiguration of All Things (Even Me)

I'm not saying this is the only way, but if you need to envision the "again coming One," try this:

First, begin with a careful reading of Matthew's account of the Transfiguration. Read it, picture it, step into the story, and BE there:

²⁸ "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here *will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*"

¹⁷ After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

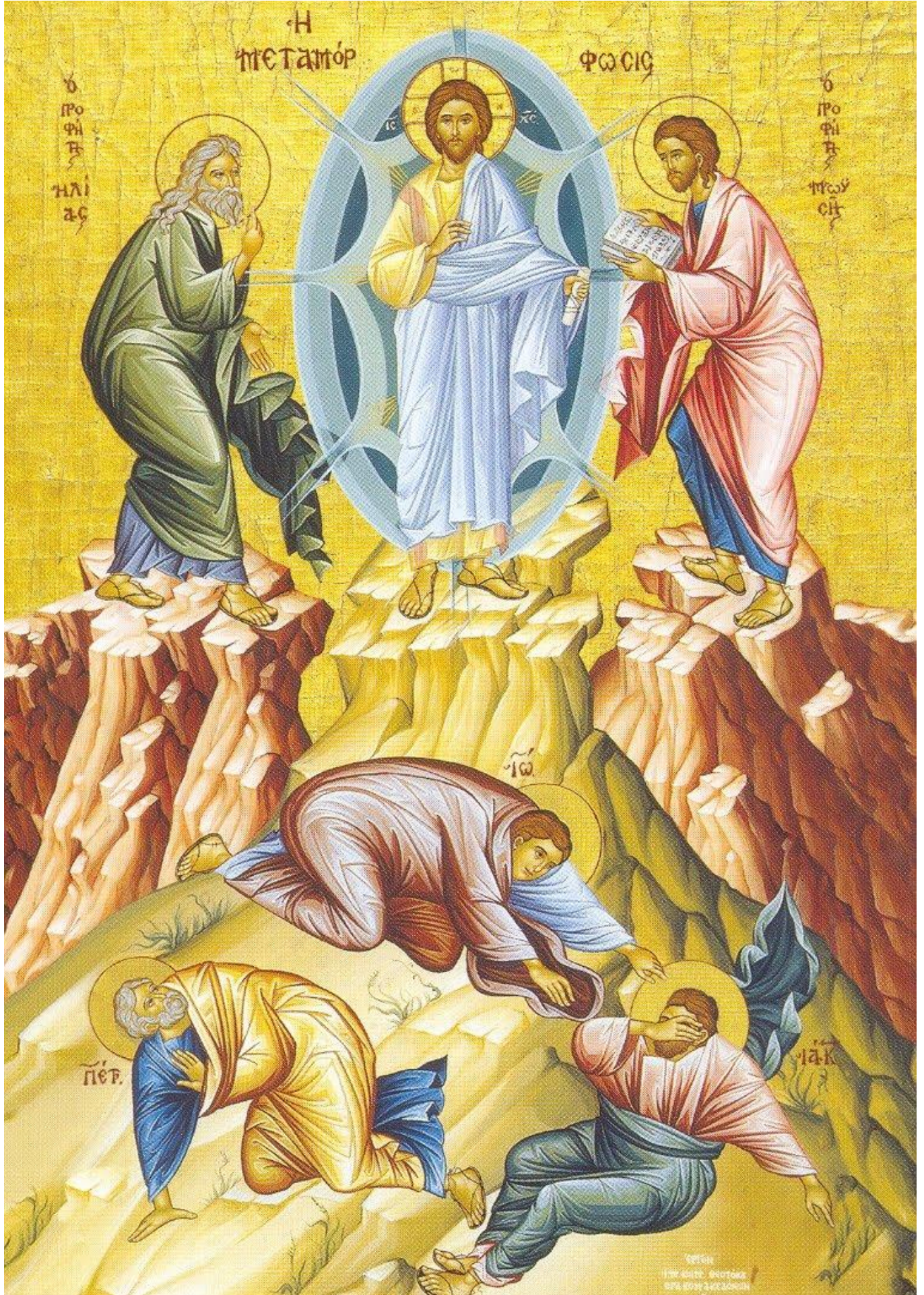
⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Consider with others before you that in this story, eternity is transfiguring time such that Moses, Elijah, Jesus, you, and the *apokatastasis* all miraculously share one space in the eternal now, with Christ (slain, risen, ascended) as our central focus and from whom we see the uncreated Light (triune Love) radiating. Behold as Christ effuses this radiant light to suffuse the cosmos ... and that we—*now* at his feet, listening to his voice, experiencing his love driving out our fear—will not taste death before we see the 'again coming Son of man' (because we are!).

And then settle into this promise:

*"Behold, he **cometh** with clouds; and **every eye shall see him**, and they **also which pierced him**: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen... And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."*(Rev. 1:7, 21:4).

In other words, from now on, if you wish, whenever you feel the urge to ask, "What ~~will~~ DOES the 'always coming glory' of Christ look like?" let THIS icon-vision be your final answer and enter the encounter afresh:



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