
Advent 1

Matthew 24:36–44
Liberated by God's Grace



*Elizabeth Eaton is the Presiding Bishop
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*



Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come.
Come to us in all the moments of our lives.
Help us to watch so that we are amazed by
your love. Bless us in our Advent journey.
Amen.

A series of Advent devotions prepared by the leaders of Anglican and Lutheran churches in full communion.



The Anglican Church of Canada



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But of that day and hour no one knows...and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man...two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left...you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Welcome to Advent.

This warning from Jesus comes after Jesus' words about the end of the world. The apocalypse is upon us, there will be tribulation and the world will see the day of God's vengeance on human sin. This doesn't seem to quite fit with the Christmas decorations, lovely carols, and relentless merriness that has been in stores, in advertisement, and in the media since Labor/Labour Day. It is jarring to hear about judgement and the Second Coming whilst shopping for that perfect Christmas sweater or sampling figgy pudding. And what about our Lord's admonition to be awake, be aware, be ever-vigilant? We won't know the hour. We might be left behind. At the very least it is exhausting to be on watch all day every day.

How is this passage from Matthew good news, and how is it good news at this time of the year? Where is the grace and how do these verses help us to know that we are liberated by God's grace? It sounds like the law to me. It seems to be about what we need to do to be ready on that great and terrible day, what action we must take so that we will be taken and not left behind. Blessed Advent? Bah humbug!

There is a secular counterpart to this apocalypse. Young children are taught that Santa Claus is keeping track of who is "naughty or nice," meting out consequences and rewards accordingly. Popular Christmas song lyrics, while upbeat in cadence, deliver messages that instill dread. The message is clear: Be awake, be aware, be ever vigilant. The day is drawing nigh.

It is interesting that pop culture can give voice to the prevailing theology of many in our churches. We don't trust that God's promised grace is real and for us and so we come to believe and act that the word of God is not gracious, but vengeful and punishing. Through that lens there is no way that we can see the gospel for the first Sunday in Advent as the announcement that we are liberated by God's grace.

But hear the Good News. Jesus was announcing the end of the world. It is the day of God's vengeance on human sin. And this is what God's vengeance looks like: a helpless baby in a stable in Bethlehem, a helpless man on a cross outside of Jerusalem. The end of the old world of sin and death has come exclusively through God's reconciling mercy.

Matthew 24: 36–44 is God's word of promise, a gift to us that we might open ourselves, our eyes, our lives to the incredible, surprising, immeasurable and intimate love of God. It's right there in front of us—two men working in a field, two women grinding meal—in the ordinary, in the everyday. God doesn't want us to miss it. God wants us to watch. ♦

Before you Creator God,
we pledge to take specific actions and to change our practices.
Jesus Christ calls us to conversion."

We pray that by our decisions, and by our actions upon them, we
may "bear fruit worthy of our repentance." ♦



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Advent 2

Matthew 3:1–12
Creation—Not for Sale



Gracious God, this day you call us to actions
which speak at least as loudly as our words and to words
which indicate a change of heart and growing regard
for your creation. Bless us in our Advent journey as we seek
your incarnate presence in every aspect of our lives.
Amen.

In today's Gospel reading we hear John the Baptist calling the crowds to repentance, to a turning around of their lives, to a turning to God. This turning must not be shallow, flaky, or fickle, but rather, deep, whole-hearted and unwavering. "Bear fruit" he cries out, "worthy of repentance" (v8). Let it be seen that your life indeed has turned around, that your focus is re-framed, and your priorities are re-set. Let it be seen that your actions line up with your expression of repentance.

This is an important message as we consider the theme *Creation—Not for Sale*, one of four themes adopted by our sisters and brothers in the global Lutheran community as they mark the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. (The over-arching theme is *Liberated by God's Grace*. The other themes are *Creation—Not for Sale*, *Salvation—Not for Sale* and *Human Beings—Not for Sale*.) As we consider God's creation, there is an urgency of concern about the global environmental crisis. We can no longer deny the harsh realities of islands drowning as sea levels rise; of deserts expanding in the face of unchecked deforestation; of weather patterns changing and growing violent as global warming continues; of lifestyles and livelihoods disappearing as the Arctic ice cap melts.

Really coming to terms with these realities was very much the focus of the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference—COP21—held in Paris. "COP21" refers to the "Conference of Parties" and to those countries which have adopted the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In the midst of that great gathering of political and religious world leaders, and among thousands of ordinary citizens from every corner of the globe, a huge ecumenical service was held in Notre Dame Basilica. I had the great privilege of being there.

A message from the Council of Christian Churches in France included the following:

"Aware of the impact of the lifestyle of most of the developed countries, we need to call into question the logic of our consumption and to allow our attitude and witness to experience conversion—practising restraint and simplicity, not as a form of heroic renunciation, but as a form of joyful sharing. Our hope as Christians rests in our belief that our world is not destined to despair, but to transformation, and that human beings capable of self-destruction are also capable of uniting and choosing what is good."

This "conversion" is the very thing that renowned environmentalist David Suzuki calls "the necessity for a massive change of spirit" on the part of leaders in government and industry and on the part of consumers in society...which includes us all. Suzuki has said he looks to both business communities and faith communities to provide leadership in calling for this "change of spirit".

The liturgy in that great basilica concluded with a litany of repentance and of pledges to have us think and act differently. Here is an excerpt:

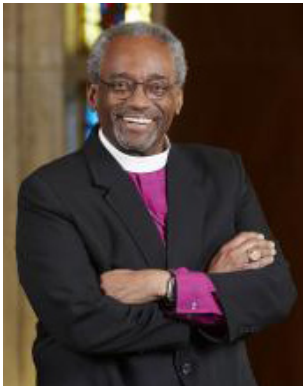
"Creation is suffering because of us.
The land has deteriorated.
Jesus Christ calls us to vigilance and commitment.

Our common home is damaged.
The poorest are excluded.
Jesus Christ calls us to solidarity and sharing.

(Continued)

Will we dare to open our eyes and be true stewards of God's creation? When countless people...both those who call themselves Christians and those who don't...continue to take this planet for granted, it takes those with eyes to see to look around, step forward, and do what is needed to preserve "this fragile earth, our island home."

As those who would indeed follow Christ, let us open our eyes to see what we have all too often missed. Let us, by the power of the Spirit, become the evangelists, reconcilers, and stewards of creation, that God calls us to be, because salvation is not for sale. ♦



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Advent 3

Matthew 11:2–11
Salvation—Not for Sale



Open our eyes, O Gracious God, and bless our Advent journey. Enable us to look beyond the familiar and observe instead your presence before us and around us. Remove the blinders of resentment and fear, and by your Spirit help us to see Jesus in the face of both friend and stranger, for your love's sake.
Amen.

What do you see? In mysteries, whether on the pages of books or on the screen, the detective is not necessarily more suave, more sophisticated, more impressive than the other people in the room. Far from it, sometimes. But the detective—at least, the successful detective—is the one who notices what others miss, who observes what others gloss over. To those who do not truly see, a half-empty glass or a torn piece of paper is simply that, but to the observant one, it can be an important clue that unlocks the puzzle.

When John the Baptist sends messengers to inquire whether Jesus might be the Messiah, Jesus tells them to go back to John and report what they have seen: remarkable healings, changed lives, unimagined possibilities. As the messengers depart, Jesus goes on to ask those around him what they expected to see when they first encountered John in the desert. Perhaps they thought they would see someone dressed to impress, someone living the easy life. But what did they see? A true prophet, someone who challenged all their expectations.

Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, we find the story of Jesus looking in vain for figs on a barren fig tree, cursing it when he found none. His disciples were surprised since they themselves could see that the tree would not bear any fruit. Why was he so upset? What did he expect? That is the question, isn't it? The disciples saw what they expected to see. Jesus always sees beyond the expected. Jesus sees more.

As twenty-first century followers of Christ, it is all too easy to take up with those earliest followers and only see the expected. If so, we will miss so much. Sure, we can pray and go to church and move forward knowing that God loves us...and all this is good. All this is of God. But God wants more for us. God wants us to do more than just settle in our faith. If we just settle in our spiritual rocking chairs, we will miss

out on all the miracles, we will miss out on all the divine opportunities, we will miss out on all the unexpected possibilities that God wants us to experience. If we dare to open our hearts to God's grace, if we dare to open the eyes of our spirits, then we will discover what the beloved old hymn says, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

As Christ's followers today, as members of the Jesus Movement, we need to throw off the blinders that prevent us from experiencing the abundant life and remarkable ministry to which God calls each one of us. Let us follow not simply in the footsteps of those early disciples, but let us follow in the footsteps of Jesus himself who offered salvation freely. There are still people to be touched, lives to be changed. But will we dare to open our eyes and see what God may be trying to show us?

Will we dare to open our eyes and be evangelists, messengers of hope to those around us who may not even realize they desperately need that hope? When the earliest disciples were afraid to accept Saul of Tarsus into their community—because all they could see was an angry, dangerous person—it took Barnabas to look at Saul/Paul through a different lens and to see...not just what was...but what could be.

Will we dare to open our eyes and be reconcilers, building bridges where chasms of hurt and resentment exist between people? When thirteenth-century crusaders looked at those who were different from them and saw only enemies, it took Francis of Assisi to view the situation in a different way, crossing through battle lines with courage and humility, and opening up crucial lines of communication with the Sultan himself.

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In Matthew 25 Jesus reminds us *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.* Emmanuel—who came to ransom captive Israel—is also with those who are in bondage today.

God calls us to join in God's holy work of liberation whether by providing comfort to those in need or by working to end unjust structures that continue to take away the human rights of God's beloved children.

I hope that, as I do, you can continue to take comfort and strength from the promise that Emmanuel, our God, *is with us.* ♦



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Advent 4

Matthew 1:18–25
Human Beings—Not for Sale



O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and bring your liberating justice into our world. Strengthen our will to address injustice and to work towards the liberation of all who are in bondage. Bless us in our Advent journey. Give us eyes to see every human being as a beloved child of God and give us the courage to proclaim that human beings are not for sale.
Amen.

One of the names of God that I love the most is Emmanuel—God with us. I remember being struck as a child by the amazing notion that God came to us in human form. The idea of Emmanuel as a baby and as a child made God approachable to me in ways that other names and forms of God did not.

O come, O Come, Emmanuel quickly became one of my favourite hymns.

The life, baptism, death and resurrection of Jesus serve to make holy the human condition. In our baptisms we are reminded that God finds each and every one of us precious, that we are the beloved children of God.

During this Reformation commemoration year we are boldly proclaiming that human beings are not for sale. This is one of four important and central themes adopted by our global Lutheran community. The over-arching theme is *Liberated by God's Grace*. The sub-themes are *Creation—Not for Sale*, *Salvation—Not for Sale* and *Human Beings—Not for Sale*.

With regard to *Human Beings—Not for Sale*, we make that statement with the knowledge of the reality that in our world there are places where human beings *are* for sale. We'd like to think there is no longer slavery in our world, but there *is*.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), over 21 million men, women and children around the world are in slavery. Modern slavery has become the second most profitable criminal activity in the world.

Someone is held to be in slavery if that person is forced to work through mental or physical threat; is owned or controlled by an

'employer'; is dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as 'property'; or is physically constrained or has restrictions placed on freedom of movement. Forms of modern slavery include bonded labour, child slavery, early and forced marriage, forced labour, descent-based slavery, and human trafficking.

Slavery exists today despite the fact that is illegal in *all* of the countries where it is practiced.

In the *Small Catechism* (1535), Martin Luther explains the 4th petition of the Lord's prayer and expands on the definition of "daily bread" to include everything required for the "necessities and nourishment for our bodies."

In a similar way, our understanding of *Human Beings—Not for Sale* might be expanded to include anything that detracts from the necessities and nourishment of our body.

When we think about modern slavery, these might include poverty, war and racism; being a refugee or being internally displaced; female genital mutilation; domestic violence, rape or honour killing; unchecked disease; the intergenerational trauma which is the legacy of *residential schools*; inadequate housing; the lack of safe drinking water; the commodification of our bodies; the societal emphasis on unattainable ideals of beauty; violence perpetuated in video games; and more. I am sure you can add more things to this list.

There are many times in my life that I have taken great comfort in the knowledge of the humanity of Jesus: that God truly understands the joys and the sorrows of human existence.

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