

November 30, 2025 - Trinity Episcopal Church - Advent 1

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***“Keep awake therefore”
Matthew 24:42a***

Here we are, at the beginning.

The beginning of a new church year, the beginning of the season of Advent. A season of anticipation, awaiting the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God, who came to live among us, to be human with us, to bring to the world light and hope and peace, joy and love.

And so because we are at the beginning of this new season and new year, it makes sense that our gospel passage today comes from Matthew chapter....24.

Wait. What? If Advent is the beginning, stories about what is to come, then why are we starting at what is very nearly the end?

By the 24th chapter in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ public ministry is coming to a close. After having spent three years traveling throughout the Galilean and Judean countryside, healing and feeding and befriending all sorts of folks, Jesus is now in Jerusalem with his disciples to face what he knows are about to be the final days of his life.

Soon he will be arrested and tried and crucified, and so since his teaching window is about to close, he’s trying one last time to get across to

his disciples what's important and what's not. What's lasting, and what's fleeting. What they should pay attention to, and what they should let go of.

The passage that we heard this morning is the end of a conversation Jesus was having with his disciples as they stood beholding the temple complex: an area covering 6 football fields, laid side by side, and surrounding those fields, a 20-story high stone wall, about 16 feet thick. The stones that made up the wall each weighing anywhere from 2 to 400 tons.

Within those walls, within that space, stood the temple itself. It was massive, as well, and even more grand, clad in white marble and gold, with huge bronze doors. The temple was laid out with distinct spaces for the various people who visited and served there.

The outermost space, the court of the gentiles, was as far as the non-Jews could go. Everyone passed through the court of the gentiles to get to the next area, the court of the women, which was as far as ritually clean Jewish women could go. Then on to the court of Israel, the area for qualifying Jewish men. Then the court of the Levites, who were the temple caretakers and musicians. Then the court of the priests.

And at the very center was the Holy of Holies, the space reserved for the designated High Priest to enter once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to make a special sacrifice to God. Each succeeding space was more and more restrictive about who could or couldn't be there.

Jesus stood in front of this vast and monumental structure, a place both physically imposing and spiritually formidable...the place which represented all that was most sacred and ancient in Judaism, its history, its tradition, its very religious identity.... Jesus stood outside this place and said, *you think this is permanent, but it's not. It's coming down. None of this will last.*

But, when is this going to happen?, the disciples wanted to know, and are we going to have any warning?

Jesus, though, wasn't really speaking literally (although the temple *would* actually be destroyed in a clash between the Romans and Jews some 40 years after his death.) Instead, he was saying that these structures and institutions that we humans so often like to think of as permanent, impenetrable, and indestructible, these grandiose and dramatic things that we count on to be there for us for forever, to give us a sense of invulnerability ...these things are actually ephemeral, and can be destroyed in the blink of an eye. Stone buildings, even massive ones, can be torn down. Institutions and systems of thought that value some people more, and work to exclude others – those systems cannot last, not in the long run.

Although it may have seemed so at the time, Jesus was not making a prediction about the eventual demise of the temple, nor was he leveling an explicit threat against the hierarchical temple system. Jesus was just telling the truth. And the truth got him in trouble, got him killed.

Throughout the whole of Matthew's gospel, leading up to this point, Jesus – in his words and in his actions – has been painting the picture about what it is that is permanent and lasting: God's vision for God's world, the way life would be if we all lived consistent with God's will. A world where, as it is described in Isaiah, there will be no more weeping or distress. A world of justice, where people will not be enslaved or displaced from their homes or land. A world of peace, where swords and spears and other instruments of war are transformed into ploughshares and pruning-hooks, things that help to feed and nourish.

Those all seem like good things, don't they? Peace and abundance and justice? Who wouldn't want all that? But for certain of the Romans and temple elite, the idea of a world where everyone would be on equal footing was terrifying. They bought into the idea of a zero sum game – that if the poor and disenfranchised that Jesus championed were enjoying peace and abundance and justice, then they must be losing ground.

The Romans and temple elite are the “they” that Jesus refers to when he tells his followers that “they” will arrest and persecute those who associate with Jesus. Yet even though Jesus knows that solidarity with him will lead to trouble, he pushes for it anyway. As I preached about last week, this idea of turning the world's entrenched order on its head was part of Jesus from before he was born, poured into him by his fierce and revolutionary mother, agitating for change in the oppressive, dominant culture.

From before Jesus was born, his path was clear. He and his followers would be on a collision course with those who benefited from the status quo, a path that would eventually lead to the cross. But beyond the cross was resurrection. Destruction and enmity are powerful forces, but they were not — are not — the last word. In Jesus' birth were the seeds of transformation, a new world order, and the ultimate overturning, from death to life.

Resurrection would be the last word. Life would be the last word. Love would be the last word. Resurrection, life, love — these are the things that last. And so we begin this Advent season with that end in mind.

In times of stress, in times of conflict, in times of scarcity, both real and perceived, it's tempting to seek out whatever it is that makes us feel safe and protected, and hunker down in fear. To seek the shelter of that big stone temple, which appears so powerful and permanent, and lapse into the system of exclusion on which the temple ran. Because resurrection can seem distant and elusive, and the path to get there is shadowed and unknown, fraught and long. The journey to resurrection requires vulnerability, and love doesn't always seem like an even match for enmity and evil. But, God promises - God shows - through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that resurrection, life, and love *are* the *only* things that endure.

We can trust that promise, and we can go looking for evidence of it. Signs of resurrection are all around, but we have to be awake to see them.

Stay awake, Jesus implores his disciples: what looks like the end isn't really the end. There's hope, if you just look for it. Or, as Tim Shriver, the longtime chair of the Special Olympics put it, "The world is full of people trying to do good. We just forget to notice."

Stay awake! Not because a judgmental God isn't going to take you in or love you if you don't, but because Jesus doesn't want anyone to miss the turning world. Stay awake, because there's hope in awareness, of both good things and bad. There's hope in paying attention.

Stay awake to the voices that distract and obfuscate, that urge us to look away, to ignore the cries of those being shoved to the side, degraded and diminished. Stay awake to the sounds of misdirection, telling you, "Look over there! If your life is miserable it's because of those immigrants or those queer people or those union members or feminists or SNAP benefit recipients." Stay awake to those who want you to demonize and dehumanize other people, Jesus says, because otherwise you're getting duped.

As we go through this Advent, let us stay awake and pay attention to the way the story of Jesus coming into the world is told. All the characters that we'll see and hear about throughout the Christmas story are a reordering of who or what is important in God's eyes. The incarnation of God as human in the form of a baby born to poor parents, away from home, in the middle of nowhere, attended by smelly animals and rough sheep herders. Stay awake to what matters, stay awake to what lasts.

And to sustain you in this work of attentiveness, I offer this blessing,
from the author, Kate Bowler, called...

a blessing for keeping your heart soft when everything is broken

Blessed are you who see it all now.

The terrible, beautiful truth that our world,
our lives, seem irreparably broken.

And you can't unsee it.

The hungry kid. The exhausted mom.

The woman who wonders if any of this is worth it.

The loneliness and despair.

Blessed are you who glimpse reality and don't turn away.

This kind of seeing comes at a steep cost,
and it is a cost you may not have paid intentionally,
but here you are.

Seeing things clearly.

Blessed are you who have worked hard
to keep your heart soft.

You who live with courage,
fixing what is in your reach,
praying about what is not,
and loving, still.

May you experience deeper capacity and glimpses of hope, as you continue
to see the world as it is.

Terrible. Beautiful. Fragile. *Amen.*