

Awake and Ready

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Church of the Ascension

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Jesus said to the disciples, "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then 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. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Matthew 24:37-44

Two weeks ago today, we found ourselves outside the Temple in Jerusalem, listening in as some admirers extolled the Temple's beauty. Jesus cut them off. He prophesied that "*not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.*" (Luke 21:6) My sermon that day seemed gloomy, but why not? Jesus himself was under siege. He would be dead in a few days. A contributing factor would be the whole religious enterprise represented by this very temple.

Now we have moved on two weeks: a new liturgical year, the First Sunday of Advent. In our readings for Sunday masses, we have left behind the Gospel of Luke for the Gospel of Matthew. But – guess what? – those Temple admirers have followed us. That same scene from Luke was appointed and read for Morning Prayer today. And even closer to home, that same scene in Luke also opens Chapter 24 of the Gospel of Matthew, from which today's reading is taken.

Jesus responds in Matthew's gospel with the same forecast of destruction. His unnerving tone continues, without reprieve, right up through today's passage. When his followers ask Jesus when all this will come down, Jesus explains that it may take a while. *Before it happens, you can expect persecution, torture, suffering and death—his words, not mine.* (e.g. vv. 9,21,29)

And then comes today's teaching, more of the same. *If you want an idea how bad it will be, just remember the epic flood of Noah, unleashed on the world as God's judgment for our human pettiness and self-indulgence, our disregard for the true good: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually."* (Genesis 6:5)

What Jesus zeroes in on here with regard to the Flood is that *no one saw it coming. They were all so busy indulging themselves that they failed to notice the gathering storm clouds. Until it was too late.* To see what it's like to be unprepared for a flood, go see the recent movie *Parasite*. The storyline initially ambles along, mostly lighthearted, sprinkled with mischief. And then comes the monsoon. Unrelenting. It overwhelms every character. Pleasantries and conventions are washed away. Only our human frailty, resentments and self-preservation float to the surface.

There's no way of knowing, Jesus says, when the final, end-all monsoon will come: "... *you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*" And he reinforces the message at the end: "...*the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*"

In the context of this dystopian forecast, we can lose sight of what Jesus asks of people of faith, those who know and follow him. You *will* see it coming, he suggests—or at least you won't be surprised by catastrophe. It's the way of this broken world. By your faith in me, you will rise above it. 'Stay awake,' he advises in the middle of this teaching, and, in the last verse, 'be ready ...'

But what does it mean to *stay awake* and *be ready*? Who knows? Jesus doesn't spell it out here. Some of us may know people who seem to have figured it out. One I recall was a former parishioner, Dorothy Anderson. Visiting her in the hospital once, she shared with pride how important it was for her to keep what she called a 'dying clean house.' "I could die at home, suddenly and alone," she said, "I wouldn't want anyone who found me to be troubled."

Dorothy never spelled out what she meant by a *dying clean house*, but we can imagine: No dirty laundry out in plain view. No shoebox up in the attic with those steamy letters from that boyfriend before Dad. No expired dairy items in the fridge.

Dorothy's sense of purpose leads me to wonder: How might we keep a *dying clean house*—morally, spiritually? And maybe this is our question to answer in Advent.

Staying awake and being ready this time around may compel us to catch up on our work of forgiveness, so that when the end comes, we won't have a long list of those with whom we should have sought amends but didn't.

Staying awake and ready may mean knowing your best, most reliable path to the heart of God—not someone else's formula or language or path to God, yours—and traversing that path often enough so that, at the end, the way will already be familiar and open.

Or maybe it's something more practical: Whether young or old, do you have your will in order? Have you designated a power of attorney for health care and a power of attorney for financial and legal matters? Or will a family apocalypse result, down the road, due to your neglect? And while I'm at it, are you aware that the Book of Common Prayer requires me as a rector to ask you, in this context: "*How will you remember the church in your legacy?*" (BCP, p. 445)

Staying awake and being ready may mean something altogether different for you, something I've missed, that *nudge-nudge-nudge* that feels as if it may be God calling.

When I think of staying awake and being ready for the flood I also think of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jew, killed at Auschwitz in 1943. Age 29. I don't know if or how Etty Hillesum knew Jesus, and I don't intend to make her into a closet Christian. But staying awake and ready seemed to be among her fundamental values. With unflinching objectivity, she saw the rising flood of Nazi hate, violence and extinction. She could have fled, but didn't. She remained with those who needed her and her gifts. Listen to this prayer from her journal:

*"God, take me by your hand. I shall follow You dutifully, and not resist too much. I shall evade none of the tempest life has in store for me and shall try not to be afraid. I shall try to spread ... my warmth ... my genuine love for others, wherever I go ... sometimes ... I long for the seclusion of a nunnery. But I know that I must seek You amongst people, out in the world. And that is what I shall do.... I vow to live my life out there to the full." Elsewhere Etty Hillesum wrote: "I know that a new and kinder day will come. I would so much like to live on, if only to express all the love I carry within me. And there is only one way of preparing the new age, by living it even now in our hearts."*¹

The world has known many floods. Many of them have caught people by surprise and wreaked havoc and sorrow. More floods are coming. Sooner or later, one will come your way, and mine. Imagine a later time, when the story of that flood will be told. Imagine how that story may feature you: your name, your life, your faith, your choices.

He stayed awake!

She was ready!

Amen.

¹ An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941 – 1943, Pantheon Books, 1983