



Advent 1, Year A

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The First Sunday of Advent: Gospel Text – Matthew 24:36-44

Matthew 24:36-44

[Jesus said to the disciples,] ³⁶ "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

SERMON TEXT:

From its beginnings, Advent has been set aside as a time of waiting and preparation for the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as waiting and preparation for his coming again. What was originally a penitential season similar to Lent, however, has now become a season in which we cling to the hope of the Christ child, whose light guides us out of the shadows that can surround us, especially at this time of the year. As Christians, we are called into the tension that the season of Advent creates - our secular lives a flurry of activities - parties and concerts, cookie baking and tree decorating, preparing Christmas cards and purchasing gifts. And yet, while the stores play peppy tunes that easily become ear worms, like "It's the most wonderful time of the year," and sentimental tunes like "Have yourself a Merry Little Christmas," the season of Advent calls us to push the pause button and slow down, allowing ourselves to be more mindful of what we are preparing ourselves for with songs that speaking of watching for Messiah and praying - in song, "Come now, O Prince of Peace."

The tension we find in the season of Advent is nothing new. There is a reason that we hear these readings this morning. Readings that fall into the category of Apocalypse. Not because they are predicting the end of the world, but because they are revealing things as they are, which is the true meaning of apocalypse - an unveiling.

As Jesus approached his death, he spent his last few days in Jerusalem, sharing as much as he could with his disciples. And most of it was stuff that makes us squirm in our chairs...but all of it revealing to the disciples the reality of the kingdom of God and naming, with astonishing honesty, the realities faced by the people he lived among.

This reading from Matthew picks up in kind of an odd place, near the end of the 24th chapter of the Gospel. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus and the disciples were leaving the temple and walking up to Mount of Olives, and upon arrival, Jesus began to teach the disciples, still overlooking the city of Jerusalem, which they had just left. In this time with them, he warns of the destruction of the temple, of false messiahs and wars and rumors of wars, of nations rising up against nation, persecutions and death and distress upon the earth. And after this suffering that comes upon the earth, he says, the son of man will come and gather his elect from the four winds. But you have to be ready and pay attention to the world just as you would pay attention to a fig tree to see when the fruit is ripe.

And this is where we enter the scene –

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

In other words - when all of these things happen, it won't come with a memo or text message to let you know. So you better start paying attention now.

For the early Christians who were the first to hear Matthew's Gospel, this was a reminder to keep the faith. Jesus had said in the two verses preceding the beginning of our reading today "this generation will certainly not pass away until these things have happened."

When Matthew wrote his Gospel, about 50-60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the generation that Jesus originally spoke those words to was passing away actively. They had seen the destruction of the temple and the persecutions and the death and distress upon the earth. Two people were going into the field and only one was coming home. Two people would be grinding grain together and only one would return. For, at that time, to proclaim Christ was illegal. You pledge allegiance to Rome and its Emperor, who was seen as a god, or it was the lions den or the cross for you. So, for the early Christians, they had no idea what their future held. All they could do, was to figure out how to bring the kingdom closer in their time and place.

We are told in the historical record that the early Christians were known for their love for their neighbors. In fact, as a means to trying to attract more people to paganism, the Emperor Julian recommended that the pagan priests emulate the Christians,

writing to a pagan priest "(they) support not only their poor, but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us." (Julian, "To Arsacius," 71)

Now, our history as a church hasn't always been as caring and compassionate as it was in the beginning, and our history as a nation, which began with the mistreatment and displacement of Indigenous peoples, certainly hasn't always been as caring and compassionate as it could be. So, what if part of what the waiting and the hope that Advent calls us to is a call to negotiate what it means for no one to know when Christ is going to come again as if it might happen tomorrow - as if those words of Jesus "this generation will not pass away until these things have happened," are meant for us just as much as they were for the people of 1st century Palestine.

Now, let us be clear, I am not urging us to imagine what it is like to live as people under political occupation, because - in this moment, we are not.

Rather, I am asking us to wonder what it mean for us, a people who are free and privileged in many ways, to look to the coming celebration of the birth of the Son of God coming to dwell among as a guide for how we are to live in this world - a world in which there are still wars and rumors of wars, where we are continuing to see an increase in the impacts of climate change throughout the world, and in a year that has been absolutely overwhelming

for many in our midst, especially those who are most vulnerable among us.

The question is, then, how can we who are made in the image of God and loved so fully as children of God, live into the compassion and mercy shown to us by the death and resurrection of Christ in ways that help us to bring the reality of the indwelling of God to our neighbors? In other words, not being able to see the future, how can we act in ways that bring the kingdom closer? And how are we being called to do this, even on days where the best thing we can do is put one foot in front of the other?

After a chapter in which the prophet Isaiah outlines all the issues that Israel was having at the time and place in which he was active in Jerusalem, he seems to start over, in chapter two, with a vision of things to come. And what does he see? Folks streaming to the mountain of the Lord so that they can learn God's ways and walk God's paths. And they are so moved by the word of the Lord that they are reconciled, beating their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, and putting an end to learning war. This is the vision of the reign of God as it will be – where no one hungers, where everyone is safe, where peace reigns. But the truth is, we don't have to wait for what "will be" to do what we can to bring the reign of God to earth. The next right thing is already waiting there for us to do. It isn't always going to be an easy thing, but the right things are not always the easy things. They are however, the things worth doing. And we are called to do them

not so that we can win our way into heaven but because Christ has already loved us into heaven through his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. As we are reconciled to God, we are called to do the next right thing, so that we can, indeed, be reconciled to each other, even as we pray "come now, o prince of peace, make us one body, Come O Lord Jesus, reconcile your people." Amen

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