

Gospel - Matthew 24: 36-44

First Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.1.19

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Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 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.”

A THREAD OF HOPE

May your words become flesh in our lives
with the stories we tell and the prayers we sing. Amen.

Always winter, but never Christmas.” That was the bleak reality for the inhabitants of Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first of seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. I read these books to Paul twice when he was little. The third time he read them to me. Each time he felt sad that the fauns, dwarves, and animals of Narnia faced life with no Christmas tree, no presents, no Santa Clause, and no hope that their situation would improve. Because my annual anticipation of Christmas begins roughly in mid-July I can hardly imagine life in Narnia under the rule of the White Witch before Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy came along, and before Aslan made the supreme sacrifice.

Hope for the future ... how could we manage without it? Wishing on a star and believing dreams will come true sound like the stuff of fairy tales, but without them how could we make it through the low blows that life sometimes dishes out – and that we occasionally inflict upon ourselves?

This morning we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. This day welcomes us to a new year, beginning with an end and ending with a beginning. Advent is deeply rooted in the basic human longing for a better time that’s as ancient as the Hebrew prophets. This brief season of Advent is future-oriented, unleashing in our human spirits the vitality of expectation and the belief that faith has a leg to stand on.

A thread of hope weaves through this morning’s readings. That thread becomes the warp of the weaving. Expectation becomes the weft. Together they weave a path so strong that we sometimes find ourselves willing to take a leap of faith – without proof or clear evidence:

Isaiah offers a desolate people new hope when he makes this promise: People will learn how to live differently. Violence will end, and the useless instruments of that violence will be transformed into garden tools. Isaiah asks people to live in faith now for the promise that will be accomplished in the future.

Psalm 122 responds to Isaiah's promise of a better time with these beautiful words of comfort for the present: "Peace be within your walls, and quietness within your towers." As we enter into this season of Advent, the very earth descends into a deeper, darker place – a quieter time – healing and rejuvenating itself in preparation for the coming spring.

We then turn to a message that's centered on these words: "... night is far gone, the day is near." Like Isaiah, Paul asks the Romans – and us – to know that this promised future will come. That future casts the present in a new light, calling us to live our lives differently now because of our faith in that promise. Promise is like that: Even during dark times when we feel lonely, detached, and out of sync the promise of a better future makes the present somehow sacred.

I find myself responding to these three readings with considerable hope, which is good. They help me bear up under the weight of Matthew's admonition to get prepared, and his warning to be ready at all times so that we won't be among those lost or left behind. Matthew's story looks at pairs of people going about the same task: one who benefits from the event and the other who does not; one who is prepared and the other who is not; one who is saved and the other who is lost. As uncomfortable as I feel with such dire warning and admonition, I'm reminded that each of the synoptic gospel writers addressed a specific community of faith at a particular time during those early days in the formation of Christianity. The Book of Matthew addressed a Jewish community focused on end times and the imminent second coming of Christ. I also recognize the support of the earlier readings: Because of the thread of hope they offer might I live my life somewhat differently than I would have otherwise? There are stories of women and men who, when interrupted from their normal routines, have been open to a call to lead their lives somewhat differently than they might have otherwise done:

A slave trader read the words of John Wesley while on a voyage from Africa with human cargo stolen from their homes and their lives. Though the route his life had travelled was well within the confines of the law, he now saw that life in a new light. He turned his ship around and set free those who would have otherwise been doomed to a wretched, crushing life of slavery. Did he experience fear about making a comfortable living outside the slave trade? I imagine so. But before returning home John Newton wrote these words about the decision he had just acted on:

*"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved."*

There's the story about a young man born into a life of wealth, privilege, and ease. He was charming, stylish, and handsome, with a quick wit with which he dazzled everyone around him. This fine life was interrupted by a call to give up his privileged status. He wore the garb of the poor, helped those in poverty, and became a strong voice against a church that had become materialistic and indifferent to the cares of the poor and the needs of the homeless – a church that seemed to have forgotten that Jesus was born homeless himself. Did he wonder if one man could make a difference or if it was worth all he had given up? Maybe. But St. Francis accomplished his life's work with this powerful thought:

"Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible."

(How welcome I find these words when I'm faced with a seemingly impossible life challenge.)

There's another story about a thirteen-year-old girl engaged to be married to a man she barely knew and pregnant outside of wedlock – a girl who responded in a surprising way to the call to live her life differently. Was she terrified for the potentially life-threatening consequences of her choice? She must have been. But somehow her faith was greater than her fear as she responded:

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.”*

Pretty gutsy of you, Mary ... nothing like the porcelain portrait we envision when we think of you. If the same request had been made of me would we still be waiting for Christ's *first* coming? Would it be “always winter but never Christmas”?

Thomas Moore, in his book, ***Care of the Soul***, enters his first chapter with a comforting thought about this troubling theme: The care of my soul begins by taking care of seemingly small, everyday accomplishments and events that fill my spirit. This I can do. I do not know how to prepare for eternal life. I don't even know how to solve the everyday problems that *complicate* my life. But along with the challenges life presents, I recognize its significant blessings, along with the promise of a gift ... one I don't understand, don't deserve, and cannot earn. Because of this gift I cannot comprehend or earn there's an expectation that I honor life and those in it, that I turn from dark thoughts, that I walk toward the light of the coming day. Sometimes this expectation that I live a Christian life seems too heavy a burden, too challenging a task, too great a risk – and my strength to meet this expectation is, without a doubt, somewhat doubtful. But a thread of hope weaves a path under my feet – and under yours – offering us the support we need to take that leap of faith – without proof, without clear evidence. “The night is far gone, the day is near.” That makes this day one of promise that empowers you and me with hope for a future we cannot comprehend or imagine, much less live up to ... a promise that has been offered to us all the same. Amen.

Additional References:

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 2: 1-5

Psalm: 122

Epistle: Paul's Letter to the Romans 13: 11-14