

Gospel**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."

Advent: Preparing for the Second Coming

Today is the first day of the new church year. In our secular life, we all celebrate the New Year on January 1st, but the church calendar begins today – the first Sunday of Advent. Perhaps, last night at the tree lighting celebration we were having a New Year's Eve party, and just didn't know it. The season of Advent lasts for the four Sundays before Christmas. It is a season of waiting and preparing for the coming of Christ. You will notice that we have changed a few things around the church. The altar guild has brought out the deep blue hangings for the church. The Advent wreath will help us count down the weeks to Christmas. Nelda and I have changed the liturgy a little bit so that our worship might reflect the expectant tone of the season.

The word Advent comes from the Latin word, *Adventus*, which means "coming." It is a time to focus on the coming of Christ two thousand years ago as an infant child, and the second coming of Christ that will happen in the future. It is very easy to focus on the coming of Christ as an infant, born into the world through his mother Mary, and raised in the loving care of his father Joseph. This story of our faith is told through picture books, nativity scenes, stained glass windows, frescos, and Christmas pageants. The more difficult *Adventus*, or coming, to wrap our minds around is the second coming of Christ. In our Episcopal faith tradition, we do not talk easily about the second coming, it is a little too *out there* with graphic Judgment Day depictions in the book of Revelation. If the first coming of Christ has become an overly sentimental Thomas Kinkade painting, then the second coming of Christ has become an overly violent Michael Bay film. Our tradition does not embrace a fire and brimstone story of God's justice and so I find the apocalyptic scriptures to be very challenging even though other Christian denominations search them for answers to the world's future.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus has been telling his disciples many difficult things about the end of days, and we are hearing the end of his conversation. Jesus is well aware that his ministry on earth will end with a violent death and he is trying to prepare his followers. He wants them to believe that even though he will die and they will be persecuted, that God has not abandoned them. In fact, Jesus says, these are the signs that the reign of God is coming, so take heart and do not despair. Jesus keeps focusing on the fact that no one knows when the judgment day will happen. Not even Jesus knows when the second coming will occur, and so he says, "you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

We all remember the story of Noah. God found one righteous family on the earth and told them to build an ark. The rest of humanity laughed at Noah for building a boat so large and so far away from the water's edge. Noah told them about the coming flood, but they refused to believe him and so when the water rose, they were not ready. Jesus talks about people working side by side in the field or grinding flour, and one will be ready while the other is not. One will be taken, and the other one will be left behind. These ominous images of the second coming make me anxious. The God I believe in wants to reconcile with all people. How can this same God have a plan that will necessarily leave some people behind?

In the last ten years a collection of 16 novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins called the Left Behind Series have sold in record numbers, surpassing 65 million copies. The novels depict the end of days by taking the text of Revelation literally. The Revelation story makes a great novel because the good guys are good underdogs and the bad guys are bad and powerful. The good guys win and the bad guys are punished in an epic battle with divine intervention. It's like Star Wars, only instead of occurring in a galaxy far, far away, the novel is set in our own back yards and in our own time. People love these novels, I think, because in the face of evil, good wins out. It's the same reason I love to read the Harry Potter novels.

The difference between Harry Potter and Left Behind is that people think that the Left Behind novels are real descriptions about the future of our faith and the human race. In a world where there is great uncertainty and we are fearful about many things, it is very tempting to try to pin down the hour and the way in which God will bring about the second coming of Christ and right all the wrongs in this world. Those who attempt to interpret the bible literally are often compelled to take control of world events like hurricanes, tsunamis and wars and fit them into the scripture to show how they fulfill apocalyptic prophecy. All of this end of days plotting and scheming ignores the fact that Jesus said that even he didn't know what the future holds for us. "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Apocalyptic writing like Revelation was never meant to predict the future, it was written to sustain the faithful and proclaim the truth that God would not abandon God's people even if they were experiencing oppression. However, exploring apocalyptic scripture is at least a six week bible study, and not a sermon.

Instead of trying to predict the second coming of Christ, I believe that the season of Advent is *a time to prepare* for the second coming of Christ. If the coming of the Son of Man is going to be an unexpected event, then Jesus is asking us to be ready to receive him all the time. How could we prepare? What would it feel like to be ready? A few times in my life, I have been in the presence of someone who seemed entirely ready to receive Christ at all times. When I think about these people, they were calm and unflappable, but also intensely present and conscious of everyone and everything around them. They had that disciplined mixture of extreme awareness and giving it all up to God in prayer. They didn't have to shut anything out of their lives because nothing could overwhelm them. They could experience the highest joy or the deepest sorrow and then let it go into God's care. They were ready for anything, they were ready for the coming of Christ.

I don't know about you, but for a long time, when I tried to imagine the second coming, I saw in my mind a man who looked like Jesus (long hair, long beard) only wearing modern clothes. I transposed the 1st century Jew into present day. But I want us to begin our Advent journey with another image of the coming of Christ. Perhaps, the second coming of Christ is not one person who will come to earth and walk among us. Perhaps, the second coming is the entire community of Christians who walk the earth and we call the Body of Christ. Christ has died,

Christ has risen, and maybe, Christ will come again when the Body of Christ is complete and whole in the community of Christians around the world. What if the reason that the day and hour is unexpected is because God is waiting for us to finally become the whole Body of Christ? We are not only preparing to receive Christ, but together, as one community of faith, we are preparing to be Christ.

This is the discipline that Advent calls us to embrace. We are not supposed to try to predict the future and exercise our control over it. We are called to let go of the future and prepare ourselves to receive whatever gift God might have in store for us. Christ may come while we are working or feasting or sleeping or playing. Christ will most surely come when we are living together in Christian community, being the Body of Christ in the world. Christ may come at any moment in our lives and our calling is to be spiritually healthy enough to notice and invite Christ to come in and dwell among us.

Amen.