

The First Sunday of Advent – Matthew 24:36-44
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church – Sedona, AZ

Staying Woke

*“Keep awake therefore,
for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”*

Keep awake. Be ready. Prepare for the coming of our Lord. There is a sense of urgency, attentiveness, and intentionality about the season of Advent. We are preparing for the coming of Jesus the Christ. Advent is my favorite liturgical season. I love the candles, the quiet time set aside for reflection; the colors blue and purple; I look forward to the birth of baby Jesus. But many of us are tempted to rush past the season of Advent into Christmas so we can focus on the bucolic imagery of shepherds and angels. We imagine ourselves being present with the Holy Family as they hear the cattle lowing, and we are tempted to drift into blissful sleep and complacency. But then we are drawn back into Advent by hearing Matthew's Gospel reading about one being taken and one being left behind, and we are awakened to Jesus' urgent apocalyptic message: “Therefore you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

In hearing this Gospel narrative, some contemporary writers and preachers have popularized its message with rapture images of the end times. They say we must stay awake with fear and trembling for there will be

weeping and gnashing of teeth. Christ will return at the second coming and

some will be left behind. However, as Jesus reminds his audience, in the days of Noah, some were swept away by surprise, but Noah and his family and a select group of animals were not left behind; they were chosen by God to begin anew. This message isn't exactly comforting because the question remains about who is taken and who is left. We may imagine that we are left to speculate about what it means to be taken or left. But the coming of Jesus into the world was never meant to create speculation. The coming of Jesus was, and is, and will be deliberate actions by God to reveal Godself in the world. Advent is about the coming of Jesus.

As we begin a new liturgical year, we are transitioning through stories about the end times with apocalyptic teachings – teachings that prompt us to be faithful in watching and being prepared for the revelation of God through the incarnation of Jesus; through the mystery of Word and Sacrament; and in the ultimate “big reveal” of the messianic Christ at the end of the ages. In the early days of the Jesus movement, “the immanent end was a characteristic of Christian preaching and teaching.”¹ Jewish and Christian writers and Stoic philosophers “shared the belief that history was headed for some great transforming cataclysm.”² Matthew’s Gospel is thought to have been written during the last quarter of the first century, during a time of uncertainty when

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV augmented 3rd ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press (2007), 46 New Testament, Note 34.

² *Ibid*, 45 New Testament, Note 24:1-51.

the Jerusalem temple was in ruins and the faithful had already been waiting for several decades for the eschatological return of Jesus. A transforming event did occur, but it wasn't the kind they had expected. "For Matthew, it is not that Jesus' first coming was historical and his second coming will be eschatological."³ But rather, for Matthew, Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection comprise the beginning of the end times. The End has already begun in Jesus the Christ.⁴ God coming to earth as a human baby is inconceivable and wonderous because the Incarnation is wrapped up in the unexpected and mysterious gift of salvation.⁵ As Christians we believe that we are living in this in between time of "already, but not-yet" – that we are already being blessed to experience glimpses of God's presence and grace, but have yet to fully share in God's glory at the end of the ages. The urgency expressed in Matthew's Gospel points us toward God's imminence. We are urged to seek and respond to the revelation of the Divine One here and now in our imperfect world, among imperfect people, amidst the imperfect choices and consequences we make in our daily lives. And yet, could it be that those imperfect relationships and circumstances are the perfect locus for the revelation of Christ? Could it be that the coming of Christ is continuing to happen in unexpected and mysterious ways?⁶ Could it be that Jesus is showing

³ Wesley Allen, Jr. - https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4302

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Richard John Neuhaus. *God with Us: rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press (2007), 17.

⁶ Hymn text by Jeannette M. Lindholm, *Unexpected and Mysterious*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J5PYcswHMA>

up in our lives not just so we can rest in God's grace, but that we may accept his invitation to participate in doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven?⁷

As we live in this in between time of "already, but not yet" we are invited to show up for others in ways that reveal how the advent of Christ is a present and ongoing reality. And we are urged to wake up to the ways in which the salvation of Christ is a "not yet" reality for many of our neighbors. We are urged, as they say in some circles, to "stay woke" – to be both vigilant and resolute about revealing the salvific presence of Christ in our ministries of discipleship in the church and the world. Staying woke may sound burdensome to those of us who are tired, and weak, and worn.⁸ But God's salvific presence is always a gift. It may not seem like it at first, but when we wake up to the inconceivable gift of God being always with us and for us, we have no choice but to respond with perseverance and hope, as we journey together toward the joy of resurrection. As the faithful ones left in the field or at the mill, we are called to beat our swords into ploughshares; we are called to turn our spears into pruning hooks; we are called to lay aside the works of darkness and clothe the world with Christ's light and love. We are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in the "not yet" places of our world. "Places where justice and equality have not yet been found. Places where hunger and thirst

⁷ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4302

⁸ Hymn text by Thomas A. Dorsey, *Take My Hand Precious Lord* (1899-1993).

have not yet been alleviated. Places where school children die of senseless violence. Places where the planet is not yet being treated with respect.”⁹

Every day Christ prompts us to stay alert to opportunities to participate in the transformation of our world; to live into the dream that God intends for all of God’s creation. To tend to the people and places and circumstances that have “not yet” been transformed by the living body of Christ in the world. Who are those people? Where are those places? What are those circumstances? They are both here and everywhere. They are particular and universal. They are always in our midst, and they are always opportunities to experience God’s salvific grace, if we stay woke.

A few months ago I was visiting a colleague at Trinity Cathedral in Phoenix. We had met to discuss the potential of a new collaborative ministry; one that would reach beyond the walls of our church buildings and into our neighborhoods and communities. As we were leaving his office to participate in the noon Eucharist, I noticed a small sculpture on his book shelf. My heart was immediately drawn to the image, and I paused in reverence recognizing the symbolism of its salvific message. The sculpture was a small reproduction of Homeless Jesus created by Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz. The original life-size bronze sculpture depicts a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench.

⁹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4302

For those who come close to the figure, they will recognize the homeless person as Jesus “because, although his face and hands are obscured, hidden under a blanket, the crucifixion wounds on his feet reveal his identity. Other casts have been installed at Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches; on the grounds of the Church of Saint Peter in ancient Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, and on . . . the street leading to St. Peter's Basilica outside of the Papal Office of Charities . . . [Many have described the statue] as a ‘visual translation’ of the Gospel of Matthew passage in which Jesus tells his disciples, ‘as you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me.’”¹⁰

This Gospel passage follows today’s reading after Jesus shares a few more parables about the end times and the ultimate destiny of humanity.¹¹ Jesus concludes his eschatological discourse by foretelling the judgment of the nations. In this teaching, Jesus urges his followers to stay awake and be prepared; to use the gifts of our resources wisely and to share them with those who have less. He teaches what the kingdom of heaven is like by offering images of kindness, compassion, and generosity. Essentially, he teaches that we are blessed by being blessings to one another. In doing so, the kingdom of heaven is being revealed in our midst. We are blessed to experience God’s heavenly realm whenever we offer a glimpse of God’s light

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeless_Jesus

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eschatology>

and love to those who linger at the precipice of hopelessness: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”¹²

Jesus the Christ for who we are waiting is already in our midst. Christ is always coming to work in and through us that the “not yet” places of the world may be transformed toward the heavenly realm that God intends. As we begin this season of Advent, let us stay woke and prepare our hearts to meet Christ who is always coming to meet us in unexpected, mysterious, and ordinary ways.

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¹² Matthew 25:35-36