

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Advent 1A
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Now And Not Yet

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

What an extraordinary thing to hear on this first Sunday of Advent. What does that mean, that the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour? We know exactly when he's coming, in fact we even know where he'll arrive. The Son of God, the Son of humanity, the baby Jesus will arrive at the stable in Bethlehem, on Sunday, December 25th, right?

Our Advent scripture readings surprise me every single year. At first glance, they don't seem very Advent-ish. Here we are at the beginning of a brand new church year, the beginning of a brand new gospel (we've moved from Luke to Matthew for our readings this year) the beginning of a brand new world because Jesus is about to come among us. But no. We don't get that kind of new beginning on this first Sunday of Advent. We get "The End." Whether the gospel for the First Sunday in Advent is from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, we always hear Jesus announcing the end of the world as we know it.

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. Great.

The texts for the first Sunday in Advent always seem other worldly, apocalyptic even. All this talk about the end of the world, when what I really want to hear is the angel Gabriel announce to Mary that she is about to become the mother of God so that God can come among us, and to hear Mary say "Let it be unto me according to your word." I want to hear that the sweet baby Jesus is about to be born, that it's time to turn inward, that it's time for softness and gentleness, for contemplation and quiet, for my heart to begin preparing him room. I wait all year long for Advent. I long for the candlelight, the short days, the long, reflective evenings, the watching, the waiting, the expectation and the hope... and those things are real. But they aren't the whole story and they aren't what I think about as I listen to Matthew's words. I think that's because in every beginning, there is an ending and in every ending, there is a beginning.

And so we begin this new church year with the end of the world as we know it... because God being born in human flesh changes absolutely everything, and we'd best wake from the slumber of our ordinary days and pay attention.

It's time to lay aside the works of darkness and dress ourselves in light. Time to beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks, time to prune away every bit of dead wood that is stunting our growth. It's time to love God's kingdom into being, even as we watch and wait for God to come among us. Advent is a time of preparation, but it's not just preparation for the birth of the baby Jesus and God coming to be with us. It's also preparation for the God who is with us already. Yes, it's a time of longing for Jesus impending birth but it's also a time of longing for God's Holy Spirit to envelop us now. Advent is an invitation for a new and different kind of life, a life lived as though Jesus could show up at anytime. Or all the time.

In Advent, if we pay attention, we see God breaking in and all manner of things turning upside down. Ordinary time – the season we've been in all these weeks since last Easter – is over, and extraordinary time has set in. Stay awake, be alert, because life as we've known it is no more, and if we're not paying attention, we'll miss the many ways God is constantly coming among us. You see, God's advent isn't just in the manger of the Christmas story, it's in the here and now of our own stories too. God is making all things new right now. And not quite yet. And that's the tricky part. It's the "right now" and the "not yet" living together.

We await the coming of the Christ child, even as we see the face of Jesus in our own child. We await a world without hunger even as we volunteer at the Helpline House food bank. We hope for a peaceful world even as we recognize the violence around us, and in our own hearts. We await the Kingdom of Heaven even as we pour out God's love working for justice and peace and dignity for all. Now. And not yet. And because we live in that tension of now and not yet, we need to be awake, to be attentive and ready, not just for what is to come but for everything that is happening right here, right now. Whether we're happily living our lives or going through great difficulty, God is here right now... and God is coming.

But about the day and the hour, no one knows... Jesus said. And it's true. We don't actually know what God's future will bring. That can fill us with hope, or it can fill us with despair. But we mustn't allow ourselves the indulgence of despair when it feels like things are coming apart. I know it can be tempting to do that, but God is coming, God is here, God will always be here, especially in the face of despair. Advent reminds us of that and invites us to make God's abiding and hope-filled presence known. As the people of God, we have been entrusted with a vitally important job - our job is to hold hope and to carry it into the world. And in times when hope is in short supply, our job becomes ever more important. Every single day, in every prayer we pray, in every small kindness we offer, in every act of justice we make, God is here, hope is alive, and we are making God's presence known.

We don't know what life will bring. We do know that life is filled with unexpected, surprising, and life-changing events. And in the midst of all the sublime, mundane and difficult times of life, God calls us to be ready, to pay attention, to recognize and point to God's presence all around

us. Because when we do that, we hold hope for ourselves and for the world, especially in the face of suffering. I know it can be hard to see God at work in the midst of great difficulty...so when we can't hold hope for ourselves, we can turn to those around us. That's one of the great beauties of a faith community, particularly this faith community. When you cannot find hope or joy or peace or promise, we will hold it for you until you are ready to take it back for yourself. God has promised to be with us always and sometimes the way we best recognize that is through the goodness and lovingkindness of the people around us.

But about the day and the hour, no one knows... Advent reminds us that not knowing is a condition we are called to embrace, that ambiguity is the normal state of affairs, and that we need to live with an attentiveness that enlivens rather than exhausts us, an attentiveness that fills us with hope. Wait. Watch. Listen. Be ready. Hurry up. And wait. This is the story of Advent. Awake from your sleepy, ordinary life and arise to new and vibrant life in Christ. The old is fading away, God's future is breaking in and there is no time for things that don't really matter. Cast away the darkness, put on the armor of light, let your own lives be heralds of God's new dawn. This is Advent's invitation, to let our own lives be heralds of God's new dawn, even as we long for God's kingdom to come. Now and Not Yet. Now. Amen.