

Sermon

1st Sunday of Advent 2019 Matthew 24: 36-44

This morning we begin another church year, the day when we begin the preparation for the coming of Christ. We begin to light the advent candles; we sing the advent hymns - we wait – and we prepare.

Advent seeks to take us back to simpler times, without the frantic pace that is the signature of so many lives today.

During Advent we celebrate how Jesus comes to us in three ways.

1. We celebrate the first coming of His birth some 2'000 years ago.
2. We celebrate his coming amongst us now, most notably in Word and Sacrament.
3. And we celebrate Jesus' second coming, when he will come again to judge creation, bringing in a time of peace and joy that is spoken of so eloquently in the reading from Isaiah today.

The end is coming, of that we can be certain. But when? There have been many who have wanted to know and have spent much energy in trying to discern the right time. This has been going on for centuries, and it will no doubt continue. Most of these predictions bring about bad news.

Earthquakes, fire and torment. All the stuff that makes for good special effects in movies, but not very good theology, certainly not good biblical study. The book of Revelation takes great precedence in their work, but the focus is on the bad news, and the signs are not on the Good News which John trumpets at the beginning of the book, "the revelation of Jesus Christ"

Millions have been made on the "rapture" series of books. They make much of the last times, and they trade very much on fear and anxiety.

Our Gospel reading this morning is put at the beginning of our church year, and the message we need to ask when we begin it is? Where is this heading, where is it going? If we don't have that, you pretty much have a sense of meaninglessness, or perhaps, our history has no direction.

But this is to say, that history is not going to end with disaster, but with something good. So the trajectory, or our path, is toward life, and the symbol of that, is the return of Christ.

And if we understand God as Trinity – the fountain of all outflowing love, and relationship itself – there is no theological possibility of any hatred or vengeance in God. Divinity, which is revealed as Love itself, will always eventually win! God, does not lose (John 6:37-39). We are all saved by the grace and redemptive mercy of God. Any notion of an actual "geographic" hell or purgatory is unnecessary, and in my opinion destructive of the very restorative notion of the whole Gospel.

So I don't believe it's going to end with an apocalypse or Armageddon, or a huge destruction which is what most people fear. But just as is mentioned with Noah and the Ark, salvation.

Knowing this ahead of time gives us courage, so we don't need to live out of fear, but from an endlessly available love. To the degree of which we have experienced intimacy with God, we won't be afraid of death because we're experiencing the first tastes and promises of heaven already. Love and mercy are given undeservedly now, so why would they not be given later too? As Jesus puts it, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living – for to God, everyone is alive (Luke 20:38). In other words, growth, change, and opportunity never cease.

But perhaps for some, it's hard not to hear this reading as a threat. It's unfortunate that so often people read biblical texts in terms of God threatening us, it seems we are always looking out for the signals of disaster.

Well that isn't the point of this reading. The good thing about God's Word, read widely and deeply, is that it can be, and should be read on two levels.

1. Firstly, we need to ask, what is the message from history.
2. And secondly, what is the message for the individual.

So historically, we are saying that history is going somewhere good, that Christ will return in glory and take us with him, and so we don't need to be afraid. If history does not have hope, it's very hard for individuals to have hope., and I think that's a lot of the hopelessness in our world right now.

So lets look at the message of hope for the individual. This looks like God is returning as a thief in the night, and we should have been prepared, but if you look at all four of the gospels, this is actually a sum of common image for God. A burglar, a thief, an unexpected landlord returning when you're not ready, now that again could look threatening. But it isn't the point, it's made more clear in Luke's version, where he says, "the Lord in His return, will put on an apron, kneel down and wait on you". So He who breaks into your life is not bad, but the breaking in, is actually good.

So, you see there's the obvious level, and the spiritual level. Here is the point for us as individuals. God gets into your life best in the interruptions, in the discontinuities, in the unexpected, in those little gaps when we're not ready. It can happen when you're least expecting. That great veil parts, and for a moment, it all makes sense.

God best gets into your life, not during our business as usual..

For the most, God has to break in like a thief, like a burglar to steal your soul. We could call this "the divine ambush", God has to ambush us when we're not prepared, when you're not expecting, when you're not defended, when you're not all in your head.

Usually, to be honest, it happens when you're in the presence of silence, in the presence of love, or in the presence of suffering.

You have to go to that place where ego does not naturally live. If your praying it takes you deeper, if you listen, about silence, about quiet, about the mystery, there is really only one message, that there is no separation between God and creation. We are not created for separateness; we are created for union. God personified that union with Christ, who put human and divine together, who anoints spirit and matter together. That's what we spend our whole lives trying to believe. That this all means something. . . . You have to surrender, you have to desire it, you have to seek it, want it, need it, and sometimes we have to suffer for it. Suffering is, the emptying out of the soul, so there's room for Christ, so there's room for God.

God has to break into our hearts and minds like a thief in the night, when you're unexpected, when you're not in charge, when you're not steering the ship. Somehow God has to God has to catch us in a moment of freedom, when we are free from our own ego's, free from our own fears, free from our anger, free from our own self.

Contemplative prayer is about sitting in the silence until it silences us, choosing gratitude until we are grateful, and praising God until we ourselves are an act of praise.

In fidelity to prayer there is unveiled the possibility of infinite growth in union with God. We can be so transformed through this unveiling that we existentially realise within us that “for me to live is Christ”

So you must be prepared, be ready, be expectant for God to quite simply to come out of nowhere. That’s how best He comes into your life, when you’ve stopped steering the ship, in those moments of silence, those moments of great love, and appreciation.

Our hope is in the one came, the one who is among us, and the one who will come again. We are to heighten our awareness of His coming. We are to “Live in the light of that day even before it appears”, as Paul said today in Romans. Advent is a time to refocus and regroup “preparing for the revelation - that is, the full disclosure – of Jesus in the joy and sorrow, the laughter and the tears, the comedy and the tragedies of our daily lives here and now” (Edward Peterman)

Jesus said to His disciples, “Be awake. Be alert. You do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning” (Mark 13:33-35).

Christ is always coming; God is always present. It’s we who fall asleep.

Amen