

## First Sunday of Advent: November 27, 2022

The Rev. Nat Johnson

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Psalm 122

Today is a day of beginnings. Today we begin a new pastoral relationship, a new leg of the transition journey toward calling a permanent rector, a new church calendar year. New things can bring excitement, energy, and joyful anticipation. And new things can also bring fear, trepidation, and anxiety. There is something about the “old,” the mundane, the familiar that often provides us with comfort. Regardless of whether we like the old or not, at least we know what to expect. New experiences, new circumstances, new years have a way of jolting us out of our comfort zones, shocking us out of our regular, daily grind and tuning our attention to new ways of being with one another and in the world. I suspect that the architects of our lectionary readings knew something about this, because each year on this First Sunday of Advent we read passages that are intended to shock us with their radical declarations about the fleeting existence of systems and institutions that feel rather permanent and indestructible in the regular rhythms of our lives. Instead of a tender story of a baby born in the quiet of night, we hear stories of destruction, of confusion, of what feels and sounds like chaotic endings.

The passages we hear on this Sunday each year point our attention to the return of Christ when the fullness of God’s reign will establish justice, peace, and wholeness for all of creation. The thematic warnings to “keep awake” and “be prepared” from the last several weeks carry over into today’s readings, bidding us to live in hopeful anticipation as we await the day that God will bring to fruition all that God started in and through Jesus Christ. Our gospel reading today comes from the book of Matthew and is taken out of the last of Jesus’ five sermons or teaching discourses, which spans chapters 24 and 25.

This final sermon is prompted by his disciples’ comments on “the buildings of the temple.” Jesus predicts the temple’s destruction, which confuses the disciples who then ask Jesus privately when this will happen and what the sign will be of his coming and of the end of the age. Jesus does not offer a direct answer and instead warns them against false prophets, predicts the rejection and persecution of his disciples, and cautions them about trusting in the “signs and wonders” produced by those selling false salvation. He assures them that he will return “with power and great glory,” a promise that is more permanent than even heaven and earth. Finally, Jesus returns to the question at hand, telling his followers that no one knows the day or time of his final coming – not even Jesus himself.

Matthew was writing to a community that was struggling to reconcile Jesus’ teaching on his return with the very apparent lack of Jesus’ “power and great glory” in the circumstances of their world. Christ hadn’t yet returned, the temple had already been destroyed, and Jesus’ disciples were already being persecuted. There were already wars and rumors of wars. The first generation of disciples and eyewitnesses to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus were dying off. Matthew’s concern was to push this new generation of believers away from speculation about how and when Christ would return by insisting that Jesus’ followers were not supposed to know and that this unknowing ought not lead to apathy or idleness or passivity; instead, it ought to cause the community to double down on their embodiment of Christian living.

The same is true for us today: our waiting is not meant to be idle pastime. Rather, this is a time in which discipleship means an active practice of hope, embodied in vigilance and faithfulness, and in the way we imitate the pattern of life given us in Christ. We practice hope by living into a reality not fully

realized, living our lives as signs of restoration, healing, and justice in a broken world. The vision of Christ's return fuels our practice of hope by shaping our pattern of life according to the reign of God amid our present realities. It forces us to take seriously the disparities between our experience of this world and the vision of what Christ's return will bring with it. The practice of hope names those disparities not in the throes of despair but in joyful anticipation that divine judgment will ultimately strip us and the world of all evil, malice, violence, and greed, allowing all of creation to rest in the peace of God.

This doesn't mean that we simply shrug our shoulders at the pain and suffering in our world and leave God to sort it all out at some undefined point in the future. The charge to "keep awake" implicates us to embody the hope we profess, to seek after justice, to love our neighbors, to care for the poor and the destitute, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. Hope is something we live in the day-to-day world; it is an action that bears witness to the inbreaking of God's reign.

The repetition of the warning to "keep awake" on this first Sunday of Advent invites us into this same practice of hope as we prepare to receive the Incarnate Christ. We are called to push aside those things that distract us from living into the hope God has given us, to dim the blinding lights that keep us from seeing the vision of God's reign, to turn down the noises that keep us from hearing the announcement of Christ's coming. We are called into a still darkness that offers us a reflection of our soul, a reflection that exposes those parts of ourselves and our lives that do not express the hope we have been given. As we examine our lives, we pray that God gives us the grace to "cast away the works of darkness," to rid ourselves of all the things that distort the mystery of the divine life that God offers us, and to "put on the armor of light," to equip ourselves with the light of God's countenance.

In the still darkness of Advent, God reminds us of who and Whose we are. In the still darkness of Advent, God invites us to engage in the practices of our faith that tune our eyes and ears and hearts to the soft rhythm of divine joy. In the still darkness of Advent, God invites us to discover the quiet anticipation of a world made new by divine love. In the still darkness of Advent, we stand at another new beginning.

The last few years have left many of us feeling fatigued and burned out. A global pandemic, national racial reckoning, growing ecological crises, political unrest and deep ideological division have exhausted our capacity to keep awake, dulled our senses in resignation to the status quo. And yet, God desires to restore our souls, to fill us with the light of divine countenance so that we might live in the abundance of God. Advent beckons to us to find our center in God, in the One who calls us into being and forms us in the image of Jesus Christ and according to the patterns of his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. In this season we are invited to strip away those habits and practices that leave us numb to the presence of God so that we might learn anew the practice of joyful anticipation and hope.

This is a holy time, a holy season, "in which we who, because of notorious distractions and fear of death have strayed, are called out of that bright chaos and into a still night. I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Advent: by self-examination, prayer, and worship, now in the time of this mortal life. May God give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, which blur and distort the mysteries of death and new life, and grant us the armor of light, that we may wait in service and devotion, making way to receive the Christ child again. *Amen.*"[1]

[1] *Planning for Rites and Rituals: Year B 2020-2021* (NY: Church Publishing, 2020), 14.