

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
November 28, 2021 – Advent 1
Matthew 24:36–44

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your word, that hearing, we may believe, and in believing, we may trust our lives, this day and all the days that lie ahead to your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“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.

We start with the ending in mind. Frankly, the scripture the first Sunday of Advent, when we mark the beginning of a new liturgical year, is always a little bizarre. It is anything but sweet. It is typically apocalyptic in nature – with signs and warnings – with sometimes fantastical

imagery. Matthew is a bit more subdued, although still a bit odd to our ears. We hear images of people not knowing when others will disappear, two in a field working side by side and then one gone, and one remains. Or two women grinding grain, one gone, one remains. We hear of events that come without warning, those just eating and drinking and going about their day and then finding themselves outside the ark when the flood comes. Or a warning of a thief coming in the night unexpectedly, as the owner of the house is unaware and asleep. But had he known, he would have remained awake. Matthew then tells us to be ready because Jesus is coming back.

That's not what we want to think about with Advent. We often want to jump straight to the sweet smell of a newborn baby, the romance of a starry night on a hill side and the dulcet tones of angels singing Gloria in excelsis deo. We want the scene of the crèche, where the mother gently rocks the baby who makes no noise, the proud father standing silently and protectively by, and the cattle gathered around gentling lowing. We like the Christ-child version of our savior, we like waiting with anticipation for the arrival of the baby meek and mild.

Many hear the phrase "second coming" or "end times" and they think about people holding signs on the street corner declaring that "the end is near!" Or maybe you have heard preachers talking about looking for the signs for the coming of the end of the world, like God has set up a big mystery to solve and we need to read the clues in the Bible correctly to break the code to know when Jesus is showing up again. Or perhaps you think about the books of fiction that came out many years ago known as the Left Behind series. With the Rapture and the tribulation and the hellfire and people left behind in misery. This is not at all what I am talking about. Please note, that I mentioned that those books are works of fiction.

The advent of the second coming of Jesus is meant to affirm that God is the creator of all things, and that God intends good for the world. I take heart in the opening verses from Matthew that lets me know that no one but God, not me, not the disciples, not even Jesus himself, knows when the time is coming for the completion of all things. I don't need to spend my time looking for clues or looking for secret meanings in scriptures or world events.

For Matthew, the birth of Jesus and the anticipation of the coming of Jesus again are not two separate events, rather they are all part of the same thing. There is no separation between then and now, rather, we are people who live in-between. We are in the already and not yet. God is already in the world, but the world is not yet as it should be. We have already been justified by God through Jesus coming to earth, even as the fullness of the salvation is not yet here.

We are an in-between people. We are in-between the time when God showed up in the form of Jesus and when Jesus will come again. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, about proclaiming release from oppression, and recovery of sight to the blind, and then after he finished reading and rolled up the scroll declared that the scripture had been fulfilled. This release and redemption had already occurred, but yet there is still the need for release and wholeness. We are an already and not yet people. While God's redemption has already occurred, it is not yet fully realized. While we wait, we also work.

I mentioned briefly the fictional "Left Behind" series where the unfaithful are left behind and Jesus takes the faithful with him. Matthew's version, however, is the opposite. It is the faithful that are left behind. Two will be in a field. The unfaithful one will be taken away, and the faithful will remain. Two will be working in a mill: the unfaithful one will be taken away and the faithful one will be left

behind. One writer says, “Matthew is thinking metaphorically here, not literally. He is not predicting what will actually happen. Living faithfully in the already-not yet of Christian discipleship does not mean that we can rest on God’s grace. It means that God gives us all the more responsibility for doing God’s will on earth as it is done in heaven. The faithful ones left behind in the field and the mill now have added work.”

From Matthew’s perspective if people do not know when the second coming will occur, they cannot wait until the time is near in order to prepare for it. Matthew wants the congregation to be prepared through witnessing at all times.

In the next chapter, Matthew 25, Jesus will compare the righteous who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned with the unrighteous who do not. Those who fail receive eternal punishment. But those who are faithful, well, they are left behind to inherit the reign of God, and continue the work.

In the coming months, you will hear more about Matthew 25, as Oak Grove has signed on to the Matthew 25 initiative of the Presbyterian Church. The Matthew 25 initiative calls upon congregations to act boldly and compassionately to see our neighbors through Jesus’ eyes and serve those who are marginalized or in need – people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, strangers, poor or oppressed in other ways and in need of welcoming. The Matthew 25 initiative is an invitation for Oak Grove to intentionally engage in our community to serve with and for “the least of these.” There are three primary areas of focus for the Matthew 25 initiative: Building Congregational Vitality, Dismantling Structural Racism, and Eradicating Systemic Poverty. This work is a direct response to the Good News of Jesus and a faithful

expression of what it means to be Christ's disciples in this time and place.

Oak Grove already does some of this work, and in many ways, is implicitly committed to this work. Becoming a Matthew 25 congregation and joining the wider initiative with other congregations allows us to make the implicit explicit. It allows us to speak about what we are doing in a strategic and focused way. By committing to this initiative, it is a way to keep us intentional in the work of justice. In addition, it provides resources and partnerships to do this work. Pastor Mary and I will be preaching from the book of Matthew for the next several months. In the new year, there will be different opportunities to study and reflect on the scripture of Matthew 25 and the Matthew 25 initiative, and engage in hands-on opportunities to serve, to work on dismantling structural racism, and to eradicate systemic poverty. Our adult faith forum after worship next week will focus on the Matthew 25 initiative, and I invite you to join in that conversation.

Matthew reinforces the idea that the community must "be ready." In this context, to "be ready" is to continue to do what Jesus taught in the Gospel of Matthew. The community is to prepare for the final advent less by doing special things and more by living and witnessing as Jesus instructed. The liturgical season of Advent is an annual reminder of the importance of faithfully doing what Jesus said.

Maybe this is exactly the message we need this Advent, to keep on doing the things we have been doing. That is, to continue to worship, witness, care for one another, and be in service to others. Even as we are in this in-between, already, and not yet place, we keep doing the faithful work, faithfully. We keep looking for those places and people that are in the not-yet places and inviting them into a fuller community.

And perhaps this is the overlooked detail in this piece of scripture, maybe we get so caught up in the fact that one person goes away, and another remains, that we don't stop to realize that Matthew is talking about two people. Two by two. Community. Relationship. Companionship.ⁱ

We are not in the field alone, we do not work at the grinding mill alone, we are not in the ark alone. God is a god of relationship. Maybe it isn't so much about who stays and who goes, maybe instead it's about remembering we do the work together. And that we invite others into the work with us.

Be ready. Keep awake. These are preparations not just for us, but for our neighbors. Our faith is measured by how much we love the other, love the neighbor. Are we ready? Are our eyes open and awake for the possibilities? How might we be ready for our neighbors? Are we putting ourselves in situations and places where we can be responsive to our neighbor and the inbreaking of God?

Matthew tells us in vivid detail about the unexpectedness of Jesus. People are doing the ordinary things of life – eating, drinking, getting married – these are the normal tasks of life, and then they are surprised by the flood. He continues and talks about how men and women will be working, and one will be taken, and one will be left. Don't get caught up in the left behind part but think about the unexpectedness of life.

Maybe that's what makes us uneasy. Because all of us understand and have experienced uncertainty and the unexpectedness of life. Sometimes the unexpected can be a good thing, but often, the unexpected brings turmoil and confusion. Never mind the natural disasters or the latest about the pandemic that we see on the news. Just think of the lost job, the diagnosis, the death of a loved one, a miscarriage, the request for a divorce, or so many other personal and unanticipated setbacks that can

take us aback and threaten any semblance of order we'd imagined we'd created for ourselves.

And we know this is a part of life. In fact, we regularly try to protect ourselves against such personal disasters. Not only through the useful instruments of life and medical insurance, but also by a host of other ways: perhaps by not taking a risk on a dream for fear of failure, or by shielding ourselves from possible disappointments in life or relationships, or by numbing ourselves to the pain of others lest it haunt us with the possibility of our own loss. We *know* life is precarious, unpredictable, and for these reasons also precious, but we often deny or are afraid to speak of that fact.”ⁱⁱ

Because while there is uncertainty and unexpectedness there is also a promise in Advent. God shows up as Emmanuel, God with us. Even in the unexpectedness of the coming of Jesus there is a promise. This passage from Matthew has a preface that frames Jesus's coming. Right before the passage I read, Matthew says in verse 31, that Jesus will “send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” This is a sure promise. Just as God gives us the promise of our reconciliation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, so too does God ensure how much we are loved with the promise that at the end we will be gathered up. While the passage may ring a little odd to our ears, it must be understood in terms of the promises of God. God shows up. Even in our uncertainty, we were created for more than fear because Jesus, whose coming birth we anticipate this Advent, has promised to come always to be both *with* us and *for* us.

As the days grow shorter and the darkness grows, we light Advent candles each week to remind us that we do not face the darkness alone but that, indeed, the light of the world has come, shining on in the

darkness to illuminate our lives and lead us forth not in fear but courage ... and even joy.

The Christ who is to come is the Christ who once lived among us on earth, and who is known in the gospel story as the friend and healer of those in need. Moreover, living in hope, expecting Christ's return, is integral to the Christian faith, for by it we insist that there is more to the human story and God's own story than that which has been experienced already.

“That when God reveals God's self, the world will never be the same. That when our world, our lives, our churches, seem to be breaking apart, to be ending, that is exactly when we can expect God's revelation, God at God's apocalyptic best.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Advent is when we anticipate change. Where we expect God to break forth. Where we wait in hope. Hope doesn't mean everything will turn out ok, that's optimism. Rather, our advent hope, is about imagining a different future. It's imagining that tomorrow might be different and walking in hope toward that future. It's about hoping for God's righteousness and justice, about trusting that goodness will prevail, even if we are uncertain of the outcome. Even if there are consequences to that hope. As one person said, “Hope is trust in the future tense.”

Advent is that time that reminds us that we live in-between the world as it is, and as we would like it to be. Advent reminds us that there are small lights in the darkness, even as we await the light of the world. Advent is a reminder that even though things seem bleak, and that there is evidence of evil in the world, we trust that God will prevail.

Amen.

ⁱ Karoline Nelson, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/are-you-ready>

ⁱⁱ David Lose, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/a-sure-and-certain-promise>

ⁱⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/an-apocalyptic-advent>