

Hope: An Advent Meditation
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 2: 2-5; Matthew 24: 36-44
November 27, 2022
Advent 1

We will begin this morning with words of promise and hope from the prophet Isaiah. This scripture is often read the first Sunday of Advent and paints a picture of the day when God's kin-dom is ushered in and there will be peace. I'll be reading Isaiah 2: 2-5

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! AMEN

Such beautiful images! We, still today, look forward to a time when, as Isaiah so poetically describes, nations will stream to the mountain of God, and weapons used to harm others will be transformed into tools to help in the garden to feed and nourish all. War will be a thing of the past, and we will learn God's ways of peace.

Our gospel lesson today comes from Matthew and offers different images of the fulfillment of time. Here, Jesus is talking to his disciples about the future when Christ will come and God's realm of peace and justice will be fulfilled. The text is part of a longer discourse by Jesus on the end of the age, where Jesus describes the Son of Man coming on a cloud in a blaze of glory. Unlike Isaiah's mountain of peace, Jesus' words are more disturbing.

Yet, this time of fulfillment will mean that the present age of suffering, disease, gun violence, racism, poverty and war will be a thing of the past. Truly, something we yearn for in the deepest places in our spirits.

Jesus says:

³⁶“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. AMEN

A pastor was in her office preparing her sermon. Her little child came in and said, “Mommy, can we play?” She answered, “I’m awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I’m right in the middle of preparing this sermon. In about an hour I can play.” He said, “Okay, when you’re finished, Mommy, I am going to give you a great big hug.” She said, “Thank you very much.”

The little boy started walking toward the door, but then did a U-turn and came back and gave the pastor mom a big, strong hug. She said to him, “Honey, you said you were going to give me a hug after I finished.” He answered, “Mommy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!”

Advent is a little like this. The word Advent means “coming.”

On the one hand, Advent is about preparing to celebrate, again, God’s coming to earth as a babe in a manger in Jesus, even as we wait with hope for the time when people will live together in peace and systems of oppression and injustice will be transformed, which is, theologically, how I understand Christ’s second coming.

While conditions have improved for humanity since ancient times, the world does not adequately reflect God’s call to justice, mercy, equality and care for humanity or the earth.

So, we stand on tiptoes as we look backward to the time when Jesus ushered in God’s reign, even as we work toward and anticipate the coming time when God’s good purpose for the world will be done.

It is here, now, between the times, that these strange words of Jesus speak to us. Once again, we find ourselves in familiar territory in Matthew trying to figure out what Jesus is really saying.

The author, blogger Debie Thomas, explicitly names the discomfort, the odd sounding nature of Jesus' message. She writes, A homeowner caught off-guard. A house that's been broken into. The Son of Man coming at an unexpected hour, like a thief in the night.

There's no way around it, these images are disturbing. Maybe even terrifying. They don't jibe with the Jesus we think we know, the Jesus in the manger, the Jesus on the cross, the Jesus who feeds and forgives and heals and saves. The Jesus Matthew describes in this apocalyptic passage is no respecter of boundaries. He's not invested in the status quo, he doesn't care about keeping us secure and comfortable, and he's not thwarted *at all* by our elaborate defense mechanisms. The Jesus Matthew describes is an invader. An intruder. A disrupter. A criminal. (<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2466-like-a-thief>)

So, let's take a look at the scripture a little more closely to see how this text might inform our Advent journey.

Jesus says that the specific day and hour of the fulfillment of God's kingdom on earth is a mystery to even Jesus. Throughout history, those who have been utterly sure about the end of time have been incorrect every single time. This uncertainty doesn't seem to be a big deal to Jesus. God's love is certain, and that it is certain, God will make all things new at some point. The movement of the Spirit is certain. Not one of us knows what the future holds, yet we know that God holds that future. If we can acknowledge the uncertainty, and lean into this holy unknowing, it can lead to a heightened awareness of the world around us.

Then Jesus takes us back to the time of Noah. God was saddened and disappointed in God's people, as they destroyed the earth and hurt each other. The people were eating and drinking, partying, and carrying on,

just business as usual, focusing on their little lives. They were alienated from God but didn't even know it.

Jesus seems to be saying that people are still doing this. Going about life without really paying attention to the things that matter to God. Like we're in a fog.

So, the message in Advent is to wake up and pay attention. The status quo won't save us, business as usual won't save us. That we are both alive and yet dangerously asleep.

As we awaken, we can recognize the fact that our faith requires sacrifice and hard things from us. And we need to stay alert because we don't want to miss the surprising spirit moving in our lives, encouraging and enabling us to participate in God's future until it comes in its fullness.

And how about Jesus talking about coming as a thief, a robber? What is God up to here?

Thomas writes, Maybe Jesus comes as a thief because we need to be "robbed." Maybe Jesus breaks in because our valuables have become liabilities, and we *need* an intruder to sweep in and take what we won't willingly give up.

What are we clinging to that Jesus needs to steal? Our apathy? Our self-righteousness? Our fears? Our unforgiveness? It's no coincidence that Jesus comes when we're asleep and vulnerable. When else would we relinquish the false gods we cling to? How else would we cooperate with the deep work of God in our lives?"

Advent is a gift to us all. Each year, we are invited, in this holy season, to practice staying awake, accepting our uncertainty in the future. We are invited to let go of the false gods of holiday perfectionism, materialism, false cheer and saccharine sentiments, in order to wait with open arms and anticipation for something deeper, and truly unexpected.

In this already-not-yet time, God continues to be present with us, showing us the way, continuously molding and forming us in hope.

Today we lit the candle of hope, and hope is fundamental to our faith.

Hope does not deny the pain of the present, but trusts in God's promises, and because of that, we can look toward a transformed future.

Hope is so desperately needed in these times. Times when refugees are fleeing dangerous regimes and seek asylum here and around the world, when wealth and industry win over the health of the planet and her creatures, mass shootings happen with alarming frequency, when children are hungry, racist policies and structures continue to oppress, when our transgender children are threatened throughout the world and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

I want to encourage us all to practice a hopeful way of being in the world. A way that encourages us, and keep us awake and alert. This Advent, let's:

- Listen to music and sing the songs
- Pray often, even or especially when life feels scary, sad, or raw
- Tell the stories that bring meaning and purpose
- Listen to a story of someone different than you
- Participate in the Dream Day at Oak Gove
- Be at worship – a lot coming up, pageant, cantata
- Give what you can to those in need.
- Put up lights and decorations – even a little change can buoy the spirit
- Open your home to those who need welcome, recognizing the Christ within
- Use your gifts to bless others – with a card, some cookies, sewing, home repair

- Read some scripture, read some poetry, read a novel
- Pay attention to the children and welcome them just as they are
- Take your time in Advent, even if it isn't your favorite, and allow God to work within you
- Remember that God loves you and that God loves everybody else, too

Let's keep awake friends, Christ is coming.

Thanks be to God.

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/advent-again-a-time-for-practicing-hope/>