

The First Sunday of Advent

December 1, 2019

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Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Gracious God, grant us always to seek the truth; come whence it may, cost what it will. Amen.

Happy New Year! As you know, the first Sunday in Advent is also the first Sunday of the new church year, and with it comes a move to a different gospel. We move from Luke, who we have spent the last year journeying with, to Matthew.

As is always the case on the first Sunday of Advent, we start near the end of Jesus's ministry, like today in Chapter 24 of Matthew. In the passage leading up to our reading today, Jesus has recently entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, he has overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple, he has told a whole bunch of parables, he has sparred with a whole bunch of Pharisees, he has foretold the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and his own fate at the hands of the Romans, and he has warned the disciples that they will face persecution because of him.

Then we arrive at today's text, which is often considered to be about the end times or the second coming of Christ because his words and message sound rather apocalyptic, or at least this is what we have been taught to think about them; what we've been taught to hear when we listen to these pronouncements of Jesus.

But Jesus isn't really talking about preparing for cataclysmic event. Rather, what he is doing is telling his disciples about how to live as his followers in the midst of chaos, in the midst of the cataclysm that is Roman rule. He isn't talking to them about some unknown future time. He is talking to them about living in the moment they are in.

At the time Matthew was written, Christianity was still small and fragile. There were probably only a few thousand people in the whole world who would have identified themselves as followers of Jesus. And, both Jews and Christians were just beginning to recover from the devastation inflicted by the Roman-Jewish war that had ended about a decade earlier.

So, Matthew's audience knew all about chaos and cataclysm; they lived it every day as subjects of the Roman Empire. As it turns out, we know a little about this too –collectively and individually. We turn on the TV or check social media and we are inundated with chaos and cataclysm: impeachment, gun violence, racism, border walls, refugees, wars and threats of wars, and the list just goes on.

And for many people, the collective anxiety in our country right now only adds to the personal anxiety they are already experiencing – whether because of job loss, disease, addiction, homelessness, fear of deportation or being separated from their families, domestic violence, incarceration, and other traumas.

Our lives today are not all that different from the lives of those Matthew was writing to about 1900 years ago. Given all of that, how do we understand this seemingly apocalyptic text? One commentator put it this way: "The 'second coming' of Christ is anytime he is present in the midst of our own chaos, our own apocalypses."

We know one thing for sure about Jesus's message: it's not ever about fear! It breaks my heart that texts like this are used to scare people into believing or accepting a way of life or a way of being a Christian.

First and foremost, we know Jesus! For goodness sake, this passage comes 24 chapters into Matthew's version of his story. And nowhere in the preceding 23 chapters has Jesus used fear, manipulation, shame or threat to convince people to follow him.

Jesus is never about scaring us; he isn't about fear, or shaming or guilt or baiting us into following him. Jesus doesn't want us to live in fear or terror, he wants us to live in peace. He also doesn't want us to live in the false complacency of some kind of eternal salvation in which some are "chosen" and some are not; that God will sit on God's throne, in a cloud in the sky and pick and choose who deserves to be with God and who will be left out of God's saving mercies.

That's not the good news. That's not what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus means for us. Quite the opposite. Jesus is always pointing us to what is good, what is holy, to what is righteous. He is always pointing us toward justice, love, compassion, mercy. He is always leading us toward wholeness. He is pointing to what God's reign looks like, and it doesn't look like terror and destruction and loss and fear. It looks like what the Prophet Isaiah wrote in the passage we read this morning:

"...they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." It looks like peace.

This is the kingdom Jesus calls us to be part of as his followers. This is the kingdom he calls us to co-create with God here on earth, even in the midst of chaos and unrest. This is our salvation. Jesus isn't 'coming back' to take away those who do not worship him or those who have not proclaimed in some specific way their acceptance of him. Jesus is never about punishment. Reading the text that way just doesn't make sense.

If we believe all that we already know about how Jesus lived – that he ate with tax collectors; touched and healed lepers when no one else would go near them; hung out with the marginalized and outcasts; built a community in which *everyone* was welcome – AND, if we believe everything he said about God and what God's reign looks like – that those who mourn will be comforted; the hungry will be fed, the naked clothed, the prisoner set free; that nothing and no one can separate us from the love of God...if we believe all this then it seems impossible to me to believe that this discourse in chapter 24 is about the threat of eternal separation from God.

And, I have a different idea about Jesus coming as a thief in the night – coming to us at unexpected times and in unexpected places and people – and it is about how he calls us to wholeness and healing in the midst of the chaos of world we live in.

How he steals quietly into our hearts when we least expect it, and opens a path to a new way of being in the world. Jesus comes never to scare us but to comfort us and to offer us a peace that the world alone cannot give us.

Jesus will come quietly into our hearts and steal our fears, help us let go of our insecurities, our shame, our indifference, our guilt; he will come like a thief in the night to steal our complacency and our apathy, and in doing so, help us find the wholeness we all desire at the core of our being. He will help us reorient our hearts toward hope and peace and justice, for ourselves and for others.

In my experience, this is how Jesus finds us - when we least expect it. He comes to us often in the most unexpected ways and circumstances...like in the form of a baby born to a poor couple seeking refuge on a dark cold night; a baby born in a stable among the animals and laid in a feeding trough. A baby who would be a king.

I have witnessed this subtle, unexpected in-breaking of Jesus. It was in a jail in DC about five years ago. I was hanging out with some incarcerated men and we were talking about how Jesus calls us to become new creations in him, to let go of the things that keep us from being whole and prevent us from recognizing our beloved-ness.

One of the men sat with his head bent down, not looking at anyone or saying a single word. Then, in a moment of silence, he looked up with tears in his eyes and he spoke. He said that he wasn't a good man; that he had done many bad things in his life and he had hurt many people.

He said that it had never bothered him until he was sitting there that day, listening to us talk about how we can all become new creations. He looked at me and said, "I want to be a new creation. I want to be a good man." Tears were streaming down his face. The man next to him reached out and put his arm around his shoulder.

As I heard his words and watched the others comfort him, I saw Jesus. He had come like a thief in the night, gently stealing Chris's fears and insecurities and shame and leaving behind his comfort and love in the form of other incarcerated men. He had been waiting his whole life for that moment. We all had.

Silence, waiting, something new. These are the gifts of Advent. A time of waiting and expectation for the arrival of God in the person of an infant child whose life will represent the hope of the world; each year we start here and we prepare our hearts to welcome this birth and all that it will bring. We wait, not in fear but in hope, not passively but openly trusting in the God of love and mercy and in the Good News that is God's son. Amen.