

A Advent 1 12.1.19

Matthew 24:36-44

Focus Statement: Christ is here! We have been transformed and we get to transform the world.

I was thinking as I read this Gospel text, how weird it must sound to children. The reading starts “But about that day or hour no one knows...” and ends, “Therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” This is the text for the first Sunday of Advent, which this year falls not only on the first Sunday, but on the very first day of December. And is there a month more carefully counted not just in the church but in the wider culture than December? Think about it. Stores aren’t selling little calendars counting off the weeks of February. Though, as an aside, I think they should, because February is my least favorite month. I always feel like it gets sandwiched in there just to make winter longer, but that’s another topic. The point is, for all of you who opened the first little door and ate that first piece of chocolate from your drug store advent calendar this morning, that we all know when Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming in 24 days. He’ll be born, we’ll lay him in a manger, we’ll all sing songs about the holy infant king of Israel, so tender and mild. We can teach our kids that Jesus, not Santa, is the reason for the season, but we can’t get away from the fact that we know exactly when to expect both of them. After all, in the church we have our own version of the drugstore advent calendar. Kids will watch as each Sunday we light another candle in preparation for the coming of the Light of the World.

Let me interject real quick here and say that as a child shaped by the ebb and flow of the liturgy and the liturgical calendar, I think this rhythm, this pattern, this consistency is super

important. I think the way we move through space and time as a liturgical community, the way the seasons shift, our bodies move to connect with the moving of the Spirit, shapes us in ways we cannot imagine. And especially in Advent, I think the act of waiting is not only powerful but essential. In an instant gratification society, Advent invites us to rest in the patient ferment of delay. Advent calendars, be they chocolate or candles, show us that progress, however slow, is happening, and the yearly pattern of anticipation and reward teaches us that other things we wait on can also develop. Advent teaches us that good things take time. The joy of Christmas follows the meditation of Advent, so to may the hope of restoration come out of the pain of despair.

But, this text is still weird. So, since this is the first Sunday of Advent, and thus the first Sunday in three years that we've read from the Gospel of Matthew, let's take a few minutes and situate ourselves in this new Gospel. Most scholars place the writing of the Gospel of Matthew around the year 80 CE. Which means nearly fifty years have passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and folk are starting to get a bit anxious that the promised return at [in capital letters] The End of All Days isn't shaping up as soon as they'd hoped. Fun fact for the day, the theological term for this return of Christ at the end of time is called the Parousia, which is a Greek word meaning presence, arrival, or official visit. You might also hear it referred to as the eschaton, from the Greek word for "last." The study of the end times is called eschatology, which literally translates to "words about the last."

All these fun vocabulary words aside, the writer of Matthew's Gospel was urging his audience to worry less about the future return of Christ in favor of living in the way of Christ now. For the writer of Matthew, the Parousia, the eschaton, had already come in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The End has come, and we already live in the time of Christ. So, the question for us then is not how do we live while we wait for Christ to come again, but how do we live now that Christ has already come? What does it mean to be the people of a resurrected Savior?

I don't know who put the Luther quote up on the whiteboard outside the sanctuary, though my money's on Laurie, but I'm glad it's there. Because I think that quote gets exactly to the heart of what it means to live as resurrection people. In case you missed it coming in, the quote reads, "God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does." This quote gets to the heart of our Lutheran theology and why we as Lutherans find it so important to be about service to our neighbor. We serve because we know that we are loved by God unconditionally, that there is nothing we could ever do to lose that love, and nothing we could ever do to earn or deserve it. And so we serve others out of gratitude for what we have already received. Not so that God loves us, but because God already does.

And this emphasis on service to the neighbor is an essential Matthean concept. If we jump one chapter ahead to twenty-five, the writer of Matthew laid out three different stories of service to others as a means of serving God. The parable of the ten bridesmaids, where five kept their lamps lit and got to accompany the bridegroom into the wedding feast, the parable of the talents, where the servant who invested wisely was rewarded while the one

who sat on his heels and did nothing was sent away. And finally, maybe the most famous scene in the Gospel of Matthew, the Judgment of the Nations, where the Son of Man is separating the sheep from the goats, and said, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

In all these examples, the writer of Matthew laid out an image of how to live in the present. Being a follower of Jesus is not an excuse to rest on God's grace. It is rather an invitation to participate fully in the ever-unfolding Kingdom of God. Which, yes, is more work, but if you ask me it's also a lot more fun and rewarding.

And here, if I may, is one more interesting fact/twist for you. You may be familiar with the popular "end times" idea that at some point a "rapture" will occur where the faithful will be lifted up to heaven, while the unfaithful will be left behind to fight it out on earth. By comparing the return of Christ to the days of Noah, the writer of Matthew imagines an opposite scenario. In the Great Flood, if you will remember, the unfaithful were washed away while Noah and his family were left to rebuild a new one.

Now, before you all decide I'm advocating some opposite day rapture theology, where people still get weirdly swooped out of their cars and houses, no. Sorry Kirk Cameron, I'm still quite convinced that the writer of Matthew was speaking metaphorically here, not laying out some apocalyptic end times scenario. One, because in that same Flood story, God promised not to do that again, and two, because the writer of Matthew literally said in this passage, "for as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man..." Which, if

you remember all the way back to high school English, is literally the definition of a metaphor, to compare one thing to another without using the word “like”. But again, “about that day or hour no one knows...” which means, we don’t really know, or I would say, nor should we necessarily care, about this mystical end of days. The important news, the news that is both good news and challenge, is that as we wait for whatever is to come, we do not have to do so by sitting on our heels and twiddling our thumbs and lamenting as all things crumble around us. No, dear people of God, the writer of Matthew says get busy! Prepare your hearts, your minds, your homes, and your worlds for the Son of Man who is already here. If you want to see Christ, look at your neighbor, if you want to know Christ, go into the world. If you want to serve Christ, then work in the Kingdom. There is, in this season of giving, ample opportunity to do just that. If you were at the Under One Roof dinner last week, you got a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, as Co-op and Trinity celebrated our joint work together. You can take a name from the Tree of Wishes, help Connie with food baskets, or ask Eileen about serving at the Pantry. You can come tomorrow at one or five and visit with the Co-op members for their monthly meeting. You can take home the prayer list from the bulletin and commit to pray for everyone on it. The promise of this text, the promise of Matthew, is that the end has come, God is here, and we already dwell in that promised future. And, as we dwell, our neighbor needs us. So in gratitude for what we have, God has given us the privilege to share. So thanks be to God, who invites us to work alongside Christ, in bringing even more fully the everpresent Kingdom of God. Amen.