

“Watch and Wait”
 November 27, 2016
 First Sunday in Advent
 Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

"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."

Introduction

The time is now! Advent has begun! It is upon us. The first candle in the Advent wreath has been lit, and we are on our way to Christmas day. And the words for today are “watch and wait.” So, people of God, look east! Watch for the star, and wait for the rising sun. Something wonderful is on its way! This is the good news!

Today’s Gospel reading may seem odd. Jesus is talking about what it will be like when he comes again at what sounds like the end. The culmination. The resolution of human history and all of creation. The passage is from the latter chapters in the Gospel of Matthew, which contain a large section when Jesus is talking to his disciples about what seems to be the end of time. The time when the Son of Man, the name Jesus most often refers to himself as, will come and bring some form of judgment over all of creation.

But it’s a story that does not lead to despair, but instead to something much better. It’s a unique story that captures the essence of Christmas and the culmination of history at the same time. Advent and the Eschaton all in one. An ancient story that does something for us that can only be done through the one known as Jesus the Christ. It’s a story that brings us hope.

A Matter of Time

Time. It is steadily marching forward. Like the ticking of a clock. Today’s story begins with Jesus answering a question raised by his disciples. It’s the question which always comes up when this topic is being discussed. It’s what we all want to know: “*When will all of this take place?*” It’s fear and loathing. Fear about what will happen on that day; loathing the idea that everything around us will be taken away.

"But about that day and hour," Jesus says, "no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Hear Jesus putting himself on our level and admitting that even he does not know when this will happen. Only God. And the clock ticks on.

And if you wind back time you hear the old prophet Isaiah offering hope to God's people centuries before Jesus. Isaiah speaks of a future time as well. Joan read his words earlier:

"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."

"In the days to come" is all we have from Isaiah as far as a timeline. One day God's kingdom will be established on earth as it is in heaven, but when? We do not know. Which is why we must stay awake. We do not know the day or the time; but we do know it's a matter of time, and we hear the ticking of the clock and are reminded we better be ready.

Sleepwalkers

Hypnosis. It can be deadly. We can easily become sleepwalkers, lulled into a kind of sleep by the routines of life. Falling into the trance of everyday existence, to the point where we are no longer really living. And this is how we get caught off guard. Jesus says,

"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."

Just doing normal, everyday activities—eating, drinking, starting families. But beware.

"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."

Beware of the mundane life; just taking care of business as usual. Marking time in a lackadaisical doing of tasks that gives in to bleakness and boredom and the lack of something to look forward to. It is the invisible chipping away of the promise that anything will ever get better than this. It is the loss of hope, and you can see it on the faces of the sleepwalkers.

But it is time to wake up! This is what Advent calls us to. Something is coming that you are not going to want to miss. And many do miss it. The Word of God, the *logos*, is coming, but some do not catch it. The incarnation of God—God as man—is being born in a stable in Bethlehem; and some will not go there because it is unimaginable that the savior of the world is just a baby; just a young boy from Nazareth, just a man from Galilee who claims to be nothing more than the servant of all. It's the kind of thing that will altogether escape you when Jesus says he will go up to Jerusalem and be arrested, and tried, and flogged, and crucified and then on the third day raise from the dead. If you are not paying attention, if you have fallen into a trance, if you are sleepwalking through life, it could all happen before you ever wake up.

Awake and Alert

We must stay awake and alert. Hear the words from Jesus:

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

And then a short parable (why not?) from Jesus to illustrate the point:

“Understand this,” he says, “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.”

Stay awake and alert. Keep your eyes peeled, because we have something to look forward to. We look to the east because the good news is that in Bethlehem we have a hope that God has given us in the person of Jesus. But we continue to watch because in time, when the clock no longer ticks, the One who transcends time will come in Glory, and we will see the King.

Our Advent Mission

As disciples of Jesus we bring hope when there is no hope. We are working toward a better tomorrow in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah who said,

“God 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.”

The old prophet was speaking very universally, but we too tell an ancient story of something to look forward to those who have nothing left to look forward to. We find meaning in lives that have lost their meaning. We cry with the grieving, and bring comfort to the broken-hearted. We restore hope. It's who we are. It's what we do.

We enter Advent with the full expectation that Jesus is going to perform as many miracles as Jesus always does, and we are going to watch, and we are going to wait for the Spirit of God to move in our lives and the lives of others at this special time of year. Many of the preparations are already in place. The 33rd Annual Island Heights House Tour and Craft Show has been worked on for months and the final touches are being made. All of it unfolds later this week. But what most importantly remains now is to prepare our hearts, and to remember and to share our hope, and to stay awake and alert as we watch and wait for God to move. Amen.