“What Can’t Wait – Hope”

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Matthew 24:36-44

Dec. 1, 2019 – 1st Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

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.

Recently a friend of mine asked if I was going to be “off” this Sunday since it was the Sunday after Thanksgiving. I responded, “No. I’ll be working.” His suggestion was that I “take it easy” and ask folks in the congregation to share their thanksgivings…those things for which they are grateful this year. I told him as tempting as that might be, this Sunday was the first Sunday of Advent. His response? “What’s Advent?”

Initially I was taken aback, but then I remembered his Christian tradition doesn’t observe Advent.

Advent…the four Sundays before Christmas Day…when we look forward to the birth of Jesus. Honestly, you may not particularly like the celebration of Advent, especially if it means you may not get to sing all the familiar hymns of Christmas until Christmas.

The church has shortened its Advent season over the centuries. Until the fourth century, and before Christmas was officially celebrated, there was a church season running from November 11 to January 6, the day when the church celebrates the magi’s visit to the Christ child, otherwise known as Epiphany.

Unlike the extended consumer Christmas season which begins before the Halloween pumpkins even have a chance to think about rotting, the time between Nov. 11 and Jan. 6 was 40 days of prayer and fasting, penitence and self-denial, in preparation for the baptisms that would take place on Epiphany. Think of it as a “Winter Lent”.

By the sixth century, the church had begun to celebrate Christmas and reorganized its calendar to accommodate the celebration of Christmas. The season of “Winter Lent” was shortened to four weeks and given the name *Advent* which simply means *coming*.

Although the penitential aspect of Advent has pretty much been lost in practice, we continue to recall the original focus by using the color of penitence…purple.

Then there is our culture’s heavy *consumer emphasis* where Christmas is concerned. We’ve barely finished eating the turkey and dressing…this is the south and it is called dressing here…when some begin to pour over all the “Black Friday” sale inserts in the newspaper.

Add in today’s scripture from Matthew about the second Advent of Christ…the second coming of Christ…and our minds might begin to spin! Why would we even go there?

We go there because Jesus went there.

When the Gospel of Matthew was written, there was no interest in celebrating the birth of Christ. Rather, the focus was on an unknown day in the future when the “Son of Man” will suddenly return and lives will be suddenly and surprisingly changed…just as the lives of those shepherds were suddenly and surprisingly changed when the heavenly choir announced the birth of the Christ child to them.

First, let me say we aren’t going to get caught up in a discussion of pre- or post-millennialism. If you don’t know what that means, don’t be concerned.

Some of us who were teenagers or older in the 1970s may remember a book written by Hal Lindsay, The Late Great Planet Earth. Even more of us may be familiar with the Left Behind series written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Both are fictional, with emphasis on fictional, representations of what will occur at Christ’s second coming.

Although all these books make use of biblical references to build their stories, this scripture from Matthew reminds us that even Jesus and the angels are not privy to the time of the second advent of Jesus, providing a sharp warning against speculation and *over-eagerness* to interpret what is currently occurring is signaling that Jesus is about to return. Any claim to do so exposes human arrogance.

This passage from the 24th chapter of Matthew is not a passage of fear, but a passage of hope! Jesus, in relaying these words, neither wants us to fall into a state of perpetual apathy or perpetual anxiety. This passage encourages action rather than apathy and hope rather than anxiety.

This passage reminds us that we are a community – a people - of faith…the profound biblical faith that God is sovereign over all human history. God is in the redemption business and as the apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28: “God works **all** things together for good…”

Unlike Macbeth’s cynical apathy:

“Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”

for those of us who claim the life given to us in Jesus Christ,

life is a tale told by a strong and sovereign God, full of both judgment and grace,

and it moves toward a time when God will make **all** things new.

The birth we will celebrate on Christmas Day is the event that began the redemption process that will come to full completion on the day of Christ’s return.

This passage from Matthew reminds us we are a community- a people - of memory. We can look forward without apathy or anxiety because we are not afraid to look back… we can look back all the way to the time of Noah.

While Noah’s story is a cautionary reminder that we ignore the judgment and power of God at great cost, it is also a reminder that we also look back at what God has done and we can have confidence in what God will do in God’s own time. As individuals and as a community of faith, we can look back together at the moments in our past where God was present to chasten and to bless and in that we find hope in God’s constant presence with us.

That is why we employ the use of liturgy in our worship.

Liturgy is the great remembering. The hymns and the prayers and the readings recall what God has done for us, for all God’s people, and for God’s world.

We wait in hope because we wait in memory.

This passage reminds us we are a community – a people - of alertness.

The function of apocalyptic literature in the bible,

those scriptures that talk about the events that will occur in the future,

is to remind us to keep awake, to be aware of what we need to be doing **now**…

to do **now** those things Christ commanded: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for both friend and stranger among us.

not just during the Christmas season when our senses are more attuned to what others do not have in comparison to our abundance,

but to do every day those things Christ commanded: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for both friend and stranger among us.

This passage from Matthew also reminds us we are a community – a people - of hope.

Because we are a people of hope, God calls us away from any anxiety we may have about Christ’s second Advent. We don’t need to keep calendars to count down the days until Christ’s second Advent.

One, we don’t know when that will happen.

Second, if Jesus didn’t know when he would return,

but leaned into the promise that his Father did,

we too can trust in the future that is held in God’s hands without controlling or even knowing the details of what is to come.

That is one of the gifts for which we should wish the most during this time that leads us to Christmas.

Reading and studying this passage in preparation for this sermon reminded me of the chorus in a song written by a contemporary Christian songwriter, Pat Terry, in the 1970s.

Just as the lightening comes from the east and dashes into the west.

So shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Put on your Sunday best.

Put on your Sunday best!

Come Lord Jesus!