

SECOND READING: Matthew 24:36-44

pg 27 NT

³⁶ “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son,^[a] but only the Father. ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

⁴² “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD**

FIRST READING: Isaiah 2:1-3

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This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

² In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

³ Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.¹ This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

“STAYING READY”

Well, did you know that today is actually the first day of the year...of the church year, that is? Today is the first Sunday in the first season, the season called Advent. During the four weeks of Advent, we remember and celebrate the first **coming** of God in Christ into the world...into a town called Bethlehem nearly 2000 years ago. BUT, BUT we also renew our state of readiness, alertness, our anticipation, preparedness for the second **coming** of Christ...the return of the Son of Man into the world at the end times. Advent means coming.

You know many churches these days choose to not really deal much with the second coming. All of the apocalyptic language about being alert, about prophetic signs in the sun and moon, about nations in anguish, and people fainting from terror, doesn't seem to fit for many churches with the otherwise festive season. The second advent of Christ doesn't foster much holiday cheer for many Christians these days.

However, this is a significant misunderstanding which needs correcting. The second advent of the Son of Man should make all of us be of good cheer. It is a most important, critical, and hopeful message which occupies a significant place in the gospels, as well as in the letters of Paul, Peter, and of course, in the book of Revelation.

Through the message of the second coming, we see the foundational Christian promise of Easter morning fulfilled. And in it, also is the important sustaining message that we live now in the “in-between”, in the “already but not yet”...a time where evil and suffering are still present but they're doomed. We are taking part now in the kingdom of God which Jesus has ushered in, yet which has not yet fully come. We look then to a time, to the resurrection, to the nail scared hands, to the promise of the second coming, when evil will be defeated, when then be no more pain, or disease, or war anymore, when crying and death itself will finally and forever be vanquished, when we and all creation will be made new. The second coming is as one commentator says, *“not simply a doctrine that we mention in our creeds: it should be a defining reality that impacts our faith, our purpose, and lives... expressed in imagery, metaphor and*

mysterious apocryphal language ... but nevertheless is a defining reality.”² It cannot, must not, be ignored.

Now, we need to stop here and take note and then, be grateful that the Christian religion is one which does not deny the reality of evil. Jesus confronted it head on. He told the truth about evil, giving his life to do so. Evil is very real, very present, and it hurts. Of course, it does. However, our job as Christians, is to not deny evil, but to look to the empty tomb, to point to the second coming, and to boldly defy it.

I have always appreciated Mary Lou Riseman’s description, in her marvelous book, “Intensive Care”, of what occurred when her 15 yo son was dying of a paralyzing disease. “It was when the delirium of death was taking over, when,” she says, “his voice seemed a long way off and his thoughts were disconnected that he suddenly spoke very clearly.” He said to his surprised and bewildered father, “Daddy, what does impudent mean?” (repeat). With tears in his eyes, his father, Larry, straight-forwardly said, “Impudent means, bold, shamelessly bold, son.” The young man paused and then he said, “Put me then in an impudent position.” Larry and Mary Lou folded his arms across his chest and made fists of his fingers. It was an impudent position, a position which defies the victory of death. It was the position of Christian hope³

In the verses just before today’s reading, there is a prediction of the destruction of the Temple. Jesus tells his disciples that they will hear rumors of wars, nations will rise against nations, there will be conflict and violence, earthquakes and great suffering. It echoes the evils of our own time. War on Ukraine, war in so many places, violence in our own streets, triple pandemic, melting glaciers, fires and storms ravaging our land, inflammatory rancor in our discourses, unleashed hatred toward whole groups of people simply due to what?... difference in skin color, sexual orientation, religion, country of birth (things I don’t believe many of us had a darn bit of choice in)...and shootings and more shootings! And during this, Jesus says, that a

² Mark Allan Powell. Commentary on Mark 13:24-37. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2265 (accessed 11-29-14).

³Mary Lou Reisman, *Intensive Care* quoted in Thomas Long, “Day One Conversations”, http://day1.org/2184-the_rev_dr_thomas_long... (accessed 8-16-12).

new age is dawning; the realm of God is breaking in.⁴ Yes, Jesus provides the advent message of hope.

So the question surfaces, “How do we live in this “in between time”? How do we live in “the already but not yet”? Well... the key it seems is to stay attentive, alert...to stay ready. *“Therefore keep watch,” Jesus says. **Keep watch with the aim to meanwhile fill each day with activity that is meaningful and holy.*** We are to, as Barbara Chaapel says, *“live in readiness, readiness to help, to stand with neighbors, to name injustice where we see it, to look for signs of God’s realm and presence in every day, in every encounter, in every moment.”*⁵ Advent is ultimately, friends, a call to discipleship, to be attentive to the Other, to the world, to the presence of God all our days. It is a call that we may be participants in the process of bringing the kingdom.

A side-note: verses 40-42 merit some particular attention because they’ve been misused. At Christ’s second coming, two men will be in a field and suddenly one will be taken. And two women will be grinding meal together and suddenly one will be taken and one left. Contrary to how the text is often interpreted...that is, that specific faithful individuals will be whisked away to heaven while others, the unfaithful, will be “left behind”, a parallel with the flood story in Genesis is referred to to explain it more accurately. That is, that the faithful are the ones who are kept (within the safety of the ark). The faithful stay on earth (after the flood) to continue their work for God.

So, brothers and sisters, the message of the second advent of Christ is a critical and hopeful one, one that can energize us to take seriously the responsibility we have for the work there is yet to do...to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, free those held captive, befriend the stranger and the outcast, visit the sick and the lonely. It provides for us the energy for the work of transforming the world, the holy and sacred work of Jesus who came so long ago to give us life here in this “already but not yet” time and it provides for us the energy for the same work of

⁴ Barbara Chaapel. “First Sunday of Advent”. <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/11/first-sunday-of-advent-november-27-2022/>. (accessed 11-22-2022).

⁵ Barbara Chaapel

Jesus who will come again to gather us unto himself, to give us life in the beyond, after our lives on earth have ended, after evil's terrible voice is forever silenced. (*Long Pause*) So, did you catch that? Both comings are realized in the person of Jesus Christ. And they are actually really part and parcel of the same one, aren't they?

*Several years ago, a pastor wrote about her advent experience. She said, "My mother died on Dec 11 and I flew to Seattle for the funeral, returning home a week later. There was a huge stack of mail waiting for us on the dining room table. Obviously, there were many Christmas cards. So, I began opening them. The images were familiar: the star of Bethlehem, the light of a candle, the lights on Christmas trees, light pouring from a stable. But then one card took me by surprise. It was a sympathy card! Then there were a few more, mixed in with the Christmas cards. At first, I separated them into two piles. Christmas here, sympathy there. The message inside the next sympathy card was this: 'Death is not the extinguishing of the light; it is putting out the lamp because the Dawn has come!'" Suddenly all the cards merged in my mind. 'The Light has come!' Impulsively, I merged the piles and I looked at my husband, who had come to read the cards beside me. He looked at me, and we said to each other, 'they all say the same thing.'*⁶

Indeed, friends...this is a time to be of good cheer. It is a time of giving thanks for the dawn has come, the one hope, Jesus Christ, the Light of the World has broken into this world and there is more to come. Rejoice! Rejoice and stay ready for Emanuel has come to us as a vulnerable baby in Bethlehem **and** he will come again at a time when you least expect it, riding on the clouds with power and glory. Happy New Year. Amen.

⁶ Elder RJ. A Sermon. Finding our way: a Communion Meditation. Lectionary Homiletics. 2006;18 (1): 11,12.