

Message for the First Sunday of Advent: Still Watching and Waiting! Based on: Matthew 24: 36-44, Romans 13: 11-14

Well, you can tell it's Advent by the New Testament scriptures we have for today -- warnings about proper behaviour and the end of the world coming. We hear about Paul's admonitions to the members of the Church in Rome to ease off of the heavy duty party lifestyle—they were quite the wild ones apparently. He strongly counsels these new Roman Christians away from “revelling and drunkenness, debauchery (and) licentiousness” (v 13). Now that's a mouthful isn't it? Paul is quite pointedly telling them not to be involved in the darker side of life, immoral living full of wild drunken parties with sexual promiscuity and best to avoid quarreling and jealousy too. Why? Well partly, because their salvation in Christ was closer than they thought. Even in Paul's time, it was thought that Jesus' second coming was near.

And next I read to you a text from Matthew, also about the end of the world coming. Matthew tells his community through the words of Jesus that no-one really knows just when the end is coming, the angels don't know, nor did Jesus himself even know. It can come upon humanity at any time, wiping out the world, like Noah's flood did. That is how it will be when the Son of Man comes again. So; the second coming of Christ comes with the ending of the world. This is deep stuff!

I mean, really, who wants to talk about being prepared for the end of the world as we're getting ready for Christmas? It's such a busy time, you have so much to do this time of year. And so you come to Church for a time of solace and worship, to rest in God, to commune with Jesus -- rejuvenate your soul, and what do you hear? Some pretty heavy duty scripture readings—including an excerpt from Jesus' discourse to his disciples about the world coming to an end when he returns again.

I'm sure you've heard me say this before, but I am really not fond of these apocalyptic texts, these end of the world scriptures. Yet, I always seem to preach on them, as much as I have an aversion to them, they draw me none the less—kind of like rubber-necking at an accident scene or like watching scary movies with one eye open. I honestly don't know how to take these the world will end predictions. Even in my lifetimes we've had so many so-called predictions. A quick Wikipedia search on my computer¹ revealed more than 150 predictions ranging from the year 365 after Jesus' death to the most recent one which was just July 29th of this year, which apparently went viral on YouTube. The next one predicted on this list was by Jeanne Dixon –remember her? – for 2020, and then there are even dates listed after that—just in case she's wrong I suppose. Some of these predictions have come from some, shall we say pretty out-there groups, but others from people whom at the time were probably considered quite credible, some serious religious groups and individuals.

So, what are we to make of these end of the world scriptures? Do you even take them seriously any more, do you even hear them? Do they touch you in anyway? It's hard to get your head and heart wrapped around these apocalyptic texts, in light of all the hype. As Christians we do believe Christ will come again, we say it when we recite the Apostles' Creed. But we've been waiting for it since the New Testament was written. Will it come? I do think so. When will it come? I don't think it's even good for us to know. But, the idea of living your life as though your day's are numbered, and that Christ's return is right around the corner, can most certainly cause us to take stock of our lives, and really think about what truly is important—and live accordingly!

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events accessed Nov. 21, 16

As I got to thinking about all this, it occurred to me, that maybe that's the whole point. Very often, the culture of the world we live in is not the culture of the life that Jesus was teaching his followers to live by. This was most certainly the situation Paul was addressing in writing his letter to the Romans. These new Christians were having trouble assimilating their old lifestyle into their new Christian values and morals—they having trouble being clear on what those values and morals even were. Their previous lifestyle—including the rituals they used in worshipping those Roman Gods was like, well, extreme partying you could say, as you may have well concluded by the very specific words Paul is using. For those folk to be followers of Jesus would mean a totally new way of life. Paul likens it to waking up from a sleep—this was a new awareness for them. Life was more than just indulging in every type of physical pleasure, and political posturing. To follow Christ meant they were awakened to the way of life that was truly going to save them from their soul destroying lifestyle, like moving from darkness into light. This was a way of life that was counter to the Roman culture they were living in, a way of life that would quite obviously separate them from those who didn't want to follow Jesus.

Now, for the folks of Matthew's time, that's just what they were waiting for—Jesus to come again and take them away. Matthew's gospel was written about 30 or so years after Jesus' death & resurrection. The early Christians truly thought Jesus' second coming was imminent, and some 30 decades later, nope, Jesus is still hadn't come, and life wasn't getting any better for them, worse if anything. It wasn't easy being a believer of Christ in those days. There must have been a strong sense of disappointment, maybe some were losing faith that Christ would ever come again. They had expected that God would have had enough of the horrible things people were doing to God's people, and in response, God would destroy the world, and Jesus would have come to take all the believers with him to heaven to a new and different life with Jesus. But, here they were, still going about their daily business, going to work, dealing with household chores, getting married, having families. When would Jesus come and save them from their very difficult and challenging lives? They had expected him to come back long before now, they were faithfully waiting, they wanted so desperately for God's good life to come to them and their loved ones in the next life. And Matthew tells them to keep that faith: "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Waiting is difficult for us, isn't it? Whether we're waiting for something pleasant or unpleasant, it's anxiety provoking. Waiting brings a sense of uncertainty, of discomfort, because we're not in control of the situation. I think that's why we fill it with busyness sometimes, to help us deal with the waiting, to give us some sense of control and get our mind on other things and put aside the anxiety. Especially when what we're hoping for or waiting for is something we have no control over and we really want very badly—for ourselves or others. Especially so, if it's something that will make life so much better. Living through the tough stuff, waiting for the good that we so desperately want to come, what we think should come or worse yet, not knowing what's to come -- well, it is extremely hard on you, emotionally exhausting, and sometime hurtful. Life can be like that at times. Sometimes there is nothing else that we can do but watch and wait, and pray.

So, what do we truly expect out of our lives? Well, truthfully, life is the unexpected happenings that come upon us as we go through our routine days. And to whom the unexpected happens, is also an unknown. Two colleagues each apply for a job, one gets their dream job, the other doesn't get an offer—and she's the one who needs it most. Two friends go to their doctors, one has a benign cyst removed, the other's cancer is not curable. Two teens attend high school, try some marijuana, one succumbs to drug addiction, the other doesn't. What can we expect out of life? The unexpected, the surprising, the life altering. But be ready also, for the Son of Man, for Jesus too, comes when least expected.

And in the midst of all of this, (the unknowns in our lives) we are invited – actually, commanded – to keep watch for the presence of the God we know in Jesus. This isn't always easy, especially when the unexpected event is

tragic. Sometimes you have to wait a while to see where God is at work and that can be painfully hard. Yet the promise throughout Scripture is that God reliably meets us at our point of greatest need and accompanies us even and especially in the most difficult of circumstances.

But as we've already said, watching and waiting are difficult for us, at least as difficult as it was for Jesus' earliest followers. Which is one of the main reasons we come to church on Sunday! That is, straining to see God at work in the ups and downs of our lives, we come to church to hear these words of exhortation and encouragement read once again, and we also come to church to be surrounded by other Christians, some of whom are struggling to see God, and some of whom have recently seen God and can share with us what they've seen.

While I'm not sure this is exactly what Matthew had in mind when he wrote this passage, I do think one of the chief reasons Christians gather is to encourage each other and help each other to see God, especially during dark and difficult times. Keep in mind that's why Matthew and the other Evangelists wrote (their Gospels) in the first place!²

So almost 2000 years later, we're still watching and waiting for Jesus to come again. But look around, see the work of God around you, see the hand of Christ in others who minister to you in unexpected ways, feel the power of the Holy Spirit's comfort, while you watch, and wait and pray.

So yes, that is the message of Advent; Christ is coming—yet he is here! Amen.

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²David Lose's blog: <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/advent-1-a-watching-for-god-together/> accessed Nov. 25, 16