

The First Sunday of Advent
December 1, 2019
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

There's a story told about a new preacher. He was pretty nervous and, as a consequence, a few minutes into his sermon his mind went blank. Still, he had the presence of mind to recall some advice they gave him in seminary for a situation like this: "Repeat your last point; often this will help you remember what should come next."

So he gave it a try. "Behold, I come quickly," he said. Still his mind was blank.

So he tried again, "Behold, I come quickly!" Still nothing.

He tried once more, this time with so much exuberance that he tripped over his microphone wire and fell off the stage, right into the lap of a little old lady in the front row.

The young preacher was very embarrassed and tried to apologize, but the woman replied, "That's all right, young man. It was my fault. I should have gotten out of the way. You told me three times you were coming!"

It's a cautionary tale, not unlike the one Jesus gives us this morning. In just a relative few verses, he says not just three times, but four actually, that the Son of Man is coming:

... as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

... they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

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

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

All the same, if Jesus ended up in our lap tomorrow ... well, like the woman in the front row, we'd probably be embarrassed to admit that we weren't really expecting him to come.

In the first place, we've got a lot on our minds and on our calendars. For all that's changed, our days, after all, are still very much like "the days of Noah" that Jesus recalls for us:

... as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark ... so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

And then, of course, I'm guessing we don't really want to think much about it all. There are churches that talk a lot about the "Second Coming" of Christ (and the "Rapture" that comes before it), but that's not our "cup of tea" ... partly because it doesn't make sense to us and partly, I suspect, because those who do talk about it have made us afraid.

"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."

The people who write those "Left Behind" books are pretty clear that those who are "taken" will be saved. Those "left behind" will face trials and tribulations.

But I'm not at all convinced that Jesus' meaning is quite what we've been led to believe. I mean, when Jesus talks about the two in the field and the two grinding meal together, he never actually tells us who is who.

Our best hint – apart from what we've been told it all means – lies in the passage itself. Jesus is the one who brought up Noah and the Flood. We all know that story, right? The world had devolved into corruption and violence. Those at fault were "taken" in that story – "swept away" and drowned in the flood.

Noah alone was righteous, and so he and his family were "left behind." They were saved in the ark to begin to repopulate the world again – to make the creation new.

Jesus also talks about a thief coming in the night. But notice that the point of the story is that we should be on guard against any thief who would steal. The thief takes away from the owner; any owner of any house wants their property to be left behind, not taken away.

And though it goes beyond our text this morning, Jesus will go on to tell a story about bridesmaids waiting for the groom to come. The ones who were unprepared had to leave to find more oil. The ones who stayed put, were the ones "left behind" to greet the groom, their lamps burning brightly, and so be invited into the marriage feast.

Greek scholar Mark Davis says he grew up in a church that preached the "Second Coming" and "Rapture" as imminent threats. But based on his reading of what Jesus actually says – and his interpretation of how the words should be translated, he named his blog (and a book) "Left Behind and Loving It." ⁱ

Another preacher and writer, Danielle Shroyer, comes to the same conclusion. She laments that we acclaim Jesus as Lord of Heaven and Earth, but then give the Earth short-shrift. She asks us to stop being afraid of being "left behind"; instead, she says "Let's All Get Left Behind"! ⁱⁱ

If Jesus is coming again – as we affirm in Advent – he'll come not to do us ill. Sarah Dylan Breuer offers an unconventional idea about the Second Coming of Christ:

*This is not the second coming of Christ. We call that one 'Easter.' It's not the third coming we're looking for either. Wherever two or three have gathered in Jesus' name since Easter, Jesus has come among them, so we must be on about the ummpteen kajillionth coming.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Her suggestion for us is that the coming of Jesus we look for this Advent is as mundane – and as special – as all those other comings of Christ, from the Incarnation right up to this Sunday morning. Before we get too worked up about the final coming of Christ in glory, recall that “the Christ who is to come” is the Christ who once lived among us on earth, a friend and healer to those in need. We look for that same Christ to come even in the midst of our ordinary days.

As in the days of Noah, we (in the midst of our ordinary days) are easily preoccupied with our everyday diversions and occupations (maybe lost in our work out in the fields or home preparing our meals) to the point that we'll fail to see Jesus when he comes into their midst. On this first Sunday of Advent, we are admonished to watch for Christ to come among us again here in our world, not look for some other world to come.

And if Jesus is coming again – as we affirm in Advent – we should not fear his coming. This world is not as it should be. It needs to be made right again. Advent admits as much. But escape is not the answer. Our gospel this First Sunday of Advent hints that we should stay put and help in the re-creation of our world, in the restoration of all that God intends for it and for us.

That's what Advent is for us ... if we'll let it. That's its gift to us.^{iv}

The Christ who first came to us long, long ago, comes again. The signs of his coming are all around us, though many of us don't recognize them any more in our own time than folks did when he was a baby or an itinerant preacher or, at the end, a convict on a cross.

Odds are he's fallen into our laps already; like the lady in the front row, we shouldn't be surprised. Maybe the surprise, when Christ returns, is that he was here all along and we failed to notice, either because we were preoccupied with our daily occupations or because we kept looking in all the wrong places.

ⁱ Mark Davis @ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/11/like-flood-or-thief-or-both.html>.

ⁱⁱ Danielle Shroyer @ <http://danielleshroyer.com/the-hardest-question-lets-all-get-left-behind/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Dylan Breuer @ https://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/11/first_sunday_of.html.

^{iv} As I preached it at the 8 am service, my sermon this past Sunday included some reflections on the Advent Wreath – interposing it at this point. I’m not sure it really fits with this sermon, let alone this is where it belonged. So I’ve taken it out of this version of the text of my sermon. I offer it still, as a postscript instead:

One of the best symbols of that gift, as far as I’m concerned, is the Advent Wreath. The origin of our modern wreaths pre-dates Christianity in northern Europe. When the days became shorter and the nights colder, work outside had to come to an end. And even inside, life had to change. Our forebears couldn’t flip a switch to turn on the lights. They couldn’t adjust the thermostats to control the temperature.

And so they were forced to compromise with the elements in ways we do not, and they brought ordinary action to a halt. They came away from their fields and put away their tools. And they removed the wheels from their carts and wagons and decorated them with lights and evergreens. These wheels, decorated and lit up and hanging in their houses and in their halls, signified a different time: a hiatus from their ordinary preoccupations; a season to hope for a new start; a time to pray for the light to return to their world.

The Church christianized the symbol, but still appreciated its wisdom and used the wreath as a focus for their hopes for a new start and the return of the light of the world. Our Advent Wreath is still a reminder of that ancient wisdom that compels us to shift gears, to look for the One who comes again into our midst.

This wreath, hanging here, invites us – if only for an hour or so – to take down the proverbial wheels that drive us the rest of the week and the rest of the year. The wreath calls on us to get off the merry-go-round that leaves us dizzy. It invites us to stop spinning our wheels, wheels that dial and roll and spin and whirl and twirl and leave us dizzy. It implores us to sacrifice the circles of endless rationalizations that keep us from looking at the truth of our world and ourselves. (And, by the way, it would caution us to avoid falling into the spiral of revolving credit.)

This wheel, hanging here, bids us turn around and consider what lies at the center of our lives.