

Jesus said to the disciples, "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."

---

The first day of this new church year begins with Isaiah's hopeful vision of a future time when people from all nations will stream to the holy mountain of Jerusalem to learn God's ways. The psalmist sings within the gates of the house of God in the present time and invites our prayers for the peace of Jerusalem *throughout* all time: "Sha'alu shalom Yerushalayim!" And finally, Matthew's Jesus arouses us to keep alert for the end of time when the reign of heaven comes to us as unexpectedly as a thief in the night.

These shifting timeframes serve to disorient us. Flexing back and forth between the time of God's choosing and the sequential time of our earthly perspective begins to disarm us. By disorienting and disarming us, these readings liberate us to learn, to expand our awareness. The future flows into our present through ancient scripture. The resulting fog of ambiguity provokes us to release our reliance on chronological time and allows us to embrace sacred time.

We engage a different dimension. Different, and yet there is something about it that feels familiar because sacred time permeates our experience of sequential time. Leaning into this mystical dimension refamiliarizes us with sacred moments in the birth and life of Jesus; his ministry and teaching, and finally his death, resurrection and ascension. In this way, we absorb and soak in the Holy Spirit that lives within us and among us and beyond us.

With our souls and minds expanded, we participate in the world of suffering as carriers of the love of God. We learn to walk in two kinds of

time in one creation, because the sacred fulfills the holiness of the temporal and the time-bound gives form to the Divine.

Last Sunday, on the Feast of Christ the King, we heard a reading that marked the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. Hanging on the cross, we heard Luke's Jesus make a promise to a thief: "Today, you will be with me in paradise." This morning, Matthew's Jesus is in the middle of his ministry, teaching his followers about the nature of heaven.

And that transition may feel a bit random. After hearing about the end of the historical life of Jesus last week, we naturally want to return our attention to the beginning; to the baby born to Mary and Joseph.

Instead, we will hear about John the Baptizer for two Sundays and we won't have readings about the birth of Jesus until the *fourth* Sunday in Advent. Our Advent readings do tell of the coming of Jesus the Christ, the Son of Man, but rather than a single note – a story about the birth, life and death of one man – we start to notice a chord comprising several notes.

In other words, rather than retelling a story in a logical circle with a beginning and an end, we encounter what is more like a spiral as come back to remembered moments with new insights. Promises of the inbreaking of God's heaven are made possible by the death and resurrection of the Son of Man. These are overlaid on the promises made possible by the birth and life of the son of Mary and Joseph.

And simultaneously, this moment, *right now*, is the unexpected hour in which the kingdom of heaven is breaking in. And this moment is also the hour not yet full of the kingdom still to come.

"Keep awake," Jesus says. Keep awake as if you were watching for a thief. Keep awake so that you can be ready for the surprising and unexpected ways that God breaks into life. God comes uninvited and unscheduled, disrupting the normal flow of our lives in unexpected ways at unprepared times.

God's coming catches people as unprepared as the people of Noah's day, when the people were swept away as they went about their daily routines: eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. When the Son of Man comes "...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."

Now, more than a few Christians do everything they can (well, other than read their Bibles) to create codes or cut-and-paste snippets from the King James Bible to cobble together a wobbly confirmation for some day in the future when they claim that God will lift good Christians literally off the face of the earth. And then, so the groundless story goes, Terminator Jesus will apparently lay waste to the rest of creation with merciless fire, including those of us who somehow didn't make the cut and are left behind to suffer God's fiery wrath. (And I'm assuming that I would be among the first into the deep fryer.)

Now, I will grant that God does enter world history through crisis and cataclysm from time to time. Even so, I presume that in choosing his examples, the devoutly Jewish Jesus knew that in Noah's story, the people who were "taken" were the people drowned in the flood, while those who were "left behind" were the people God saved to begin humanity anew.

And given that Matthew's is the most Jewish of the four Gospels, I also presume that Jesus was well aware of God's covenant *with all living creatures* that never again would all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood; that God would never again allow a flood to destroy the earth. And using fire instead of water is a cheap loophole, beneath the dignity of God.

Other Christians suppose that Jesus is referring here to the end of each human life, at which time each of us will stand before God to give an accounting for the life we lived. It's true that the overwhelming majority of us have no idea when we will die. And yet, when our own death comes, only our individual heartbeat comes to an end, not all human history. What's more, in Noah's dramatic story, all the action took place right here on earth, not in some heavenly court in the afterlife.

The context of Matthew's story opens another more life-affirming and even more awesome interpretation of the "end times." Matthew's Gospel was written in Greek sometime around 80 to 85 C.E. Jesus had died and had been resurrected nearly 50 years earlier. Just 10 to 15 years before this Gospel was captured, Titus and the Roman Empire had destroyed the Second Temple and put down the Jewish revolt. Hope could easily have evaporated as the expected return of Jesus

became an on-going delay. Matthew's community had to rethink their expectations.

You see, first century Middle Easterners did not have much interest in thinking about the future. The future was God's to know—and God's *only*—so any human effort to learn it would be futile. They lived almost entirely in the present moment, until Matthew persuaded his community that their hope was in a not too distant future.

We, on the other hand, have become almost fully *future*-focused. We start thinking about college when a baby is born. We start thinking about retirement when we start our first job. We seek to protect our future selves with savings, investments and insurance plans. We can become so future-oriented that, unlike our ancient grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith, many of us miss the present moment entirely.

After nearly 2,000 years of waiting for the coming of the Son of Man, we also need to rethink what it is that we wait for. There is a starting point in this Gospel reading. "For as the days of Noah were," Jesus begins, "so will be the coming of the Son of Man."

Now, let tell you about a delightfully slippery word: "parousia." It is an English rendering of Matthew's original Greek word that belongs in the passage to read: "...so will be the *parousia* of the Son of Man." Parousia in this reading can mean "the being beside" or "the presence" of the Son of Man. St. Paul used this same word in his letter to the Philippians to refer to his own "presence" and the negative form to refer to his "absence."

Hear Jesus saying: "For just as the days the days of Noah, so will be the presence, the 'being-beside,' of the Son of Man." And so, rather than watching for some future day characterized by cruel separation and violence, or the possibility of judgment at the end of each human life, we might stay awake for a third, more *presence-* and *present-*oriented option here at the opening of Advent.

Advent is partially about waiting for the promised light to come, but it is also about keeping awake to the present. That's the nature of our spiraling liturgical movement. We revisit moments from ancient stories and reinvigorate them, finding fresh insights into the present. We trust that each pass through the sequence of seasons brings God's eternal time ever closer, ever clearer.

The unexpected day and hour are not passively waiting for us in some distant future; they are rising even in this day—in this very hour. We may never be fully awake and we will *never* be fully ready, but watch: God is breaking into our lives even now. Life is a continual awakening to the dawning light of God within us, among us and around us.

Every moment of our lives is a sacred season. Life consists of countless unique moments, each one an opportunity that will never come again. Every chore we start, every decision we make, whether trivial or profoundly significant, is a season for sharing God's love. We make ourselves ready, for the Son of Man *is beside* us at unexpected hours.

---

Works cited or consulted:

- Allen, Ronald J., Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni. Wilhelm. *Preaching Gods Transforming Justice*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.
- Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Holtz, OSB., Albert. *From Holidays to Holy Days: a Benedictine Walk through Advent*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 2008.
- Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong. *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997.
- Shea, John. *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006.