

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

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

My friends, it is already Advent! The first candle on the wreath is lit, and we have begun a new liturgical year. Did you ever realize that the beginning of the Church year is the first Sunday in Advent? We start the sacred story all over again, *and* we use a new series of readings. The readings for our worship services are divided into a three year cycle, creatively named Year A, Year B, and Year C. We just finished Year C, with its use of the Gospel of Luke; beginning today we will start Year A, and most of our gospel readings will be from the Gospel of Matthew.

The word Advent comes from Latin, and means “coming” or “arrival.” During the season of Advent we are waiting for the arrival of Jesus—his birth at Christmas. We’re also focusing on his *second* coming, because we know he has already been born, more than 2000 years ago. In our gospel reading for today Jesus is talking about this second coming, or *parousia*. Jesus is clear that this second coming will take everyone by surprise—“that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Even Jesus doesn’t know when the final judgment will be, so it’s always been interesting to see when people make predictions about the date of end of the world. Remember Y2K? Remember the many times people have said “it’s tomorrow”? A friend of mine was once so amazed at several residents of her apartment complex, and their insistence that the rapture was going to happen the next day. So before she went to bed that night she placed a complete outfit, including jewelry, shoes, and a purse, in the hall outside of her apartment, so that it looked like she’d been raptured right out of it. We can’t know when it’s going to happen—Jesus says even he doesn’t know. We’re waiting.

Jesus also says that the second coming will take place in the middle of normal life. He uses the example of Noah and the flood and how people were just going about their daily existing, “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” expecting things to carry on the way they always had. The flood came suddenly and “swept them all away.” When the second coming happens, he says, the righteous will be taken, and the unrighteous will be left behind. You’ve probably heard of the *Left Behind* series of books. Has anyone read any of them? I confess that I haven’t, but they apparently describe a fictional account of what life is like for those who have not been saved at the second coming. To begin with, they see people disappearing all around them, just as Jesus describes.

Because “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour,” Jesus exhorts his listeners to “be ready.” That doesn’t mean we need to be watching every single moment

for the second coming, but to live the way Jesus has taught us to live. Being ready for the second coming means being ready to welcome the Savior, and being able to say that we *did our best* to follow him. We actually worked at loving God, and loving our neighbor. So, in a way this passage is as much about how we live now as it is about the end times. What does it look like for you in your daily life to be loving God and your neighbor?

A few years ago I was sitting with a woman whose young adult son had been brought into the emergency room with a heroin overdose. I'll call him Jim. Everything medically possible had been done for this young man, but his brain died as a result of his overdose. Jim's body was still living on a ventilator, but all the tests showed that he had no brain function. In Virginia, brain death is death, and so the young man's mother had been asked if she wanted to donate her son's organs: his heart, his kidneys, his pancreas and his lungs. At first, of course, she was stunned and reeling with the shock of his death. But over the course of the day, as we talked, she began to see what she perceived as a kind of redemption for Jim. Since he was fifteen years old he had been using drugs, and trying to stop it. Again and again he had been in rehab, only to fall back into the pernicious clutches of heroin. He'd dropped out of school, been in and out of jail, and alienated most of his family as a result of his drug use. His mother had eventually given up on trying to help him.

"But this," she said, "this donation thing could be something *good* that could come from Jim's life," she said. "I know God didn't put this addiction on him, but maybe this is God's way of helping him to love other people, instead of hurting them. The doctor said Jim could save six people if he's a match for them. He could save *six people's* lives." She decided to go ahead with the donation, and they did find matches for everything. His mother was tearfully grateful at the news. "Love your neighbor as yourself," she said. "I don't even have to know my neighbor to love them, do I?"

Most of us will not have to make this dramatic of a decision on what it looks like to follow Jesus, but we do have daily decisions to make. Do we cut people off in traffic? Do we let a person with just three items go ahead of us in the grocery line? Do we gossip about someone if we hear something odd about them? Do we volunteer our time to something meaningful? Do we keep our promises? Do we treat people with respect? These, and many other daily questions are the ones we have to answer in an effort to "be ready," as Jesus says. It is in the mundane details of daily life in which we follow him, and watch for him. And we don't need to do everything. We don't need to be superheroes. We don't need to be perfect. We need to do the best we can, hoping and trusting in Jesus. And it will be enough. Amen.

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