

Advent 1A
Peace, Seattle
November 27, 2016
Isaiah 2:1-5, Matt 24:36-44, Rom 13:11-14

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

Advent is upon us, surprising us with its quickness, and bringing in its wake reminders of all that remains to be done before Christmas arrives.

The prophetic texts we're hearing from ISAIAH these four weeks offer up expansive portraits of the inbreaking of God's reign of peace, God's shalom.

Straight out of the shoot this morning Isaiah sings of the time when the mountain of the LORD will draw together peoples from all nations, races and cultures, draw them as the inexorable power of gravity to the center and marvelous transformations will unfold:

Swords beaten into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks...

A complete reorientation of humankind from economies of war to economies of peace.

As we tune in to Isaiah this Advent, be ready to have your breath taken away by the incredible sweeping vision, the all encompassing majesty of God's dream taking flight.

The taste of Handel we'll get during today's offertory provides an example of how these ancient texts can come alive through the idiom of music. That's one part of what this rich season holds for us.

Another of the early themes of Advent is captured in the New Testament texts we have before us this morning: watchfulness, wakefulness, vigilance.

In Romans Paul writes:

YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS, NOW IS THE MOMENT FOR YOU TO WAKE FROM SLEEP.
FOR SALVATION IS NEARER TO US NOW THAN WHEN WE BECAME BELIEVERS;
THE NIGHT IS FAR GONE. THE DAY IS NEAR.

Paul's language, as always, is purposeful here.

The TIME of which he speaks isn't CHRONOS time – the time you get when you look at your wristwatch or your phone – but KAIROS time: full time, ripe time, time that has nothing to do with hands on a clock and everything to do with something unprecedented breaking into the world.

Something is about to dawn, says Paul; light is on its way, and we're invited to live honorably so that we have nothing of which to be ashamed when that day dawns.

In Matthew, Jesus adds his voice to the sense of urgency. Speaking with his disciples about the end times, he says:

ABOUT THAT DAY AND HOUR NO ONE KNOWS, THEREFORE YOU MUST BE READY, FOR THE SON OF MAN IS COMING AT AN UNEXPECTED HOUR.

Over the centuries some Christians have tried to second-guess Jesus when it comes to this 2nd advent.

In his book, WHEN TIME SHALL BE NO MORE, Paul Boyer traces the people and movements through history who were certain that the time of which Christ spoke was at hand.

In nearly every century, it seems, for the past two thousand years, there have been groups of people who were convinced that Christ's return was imminent.

- They pointed to signs;
- they created elaborate interpretations of Scripture,
- they drew up charts and maps and calendars.
- Some even sold possessions and literally climbed up a mountain to wait.

From the time I served in Clark County, I recall a full-page add in the Vancouver newspaper that listed **"8 compelling reasons why Christ is coming very, very soon."**

It quoted from Scripture and used contemporary events as "evidence" to back up its claims.

The author, you see, claimed to know the signs.

But in today's gospel, Advent seems to be more about not knowing than knowing.

Four times over, the reading tells us that not knowing plays an important part in the divine design.

Christ will indeed come, as the Scriptures attest, but on God's time line, not ours. We can't make this advent come sooner because we are eager, nor can we delay it because we are not ready.

Verses 43-44 push the image of the unexpected guest even further:

Understand this (says Jesus): 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.

There are times in Scripture when the return of Jesus is spoken of as a grand, cosmic event in which the Anointed One descends on clouds from on high. The trumpets sound, the dead are raised, Christ ascends in glory and power. A real show-stopper.

But nestled in these verses is another image. The coming of the Son of Man, Jesus says, may be like a thief, coming when you least expect it. What on earth could he mean by that?

During my early seminary years I worked as a house parent in an apartment program for pregnant women and young mothers.

One of my chief duties was transporting women to the hospital when it came time for them to deliver. I learned to keep my clothes right next to my bed. Being on guard and waking from sleep at all hours was part of my job description!

After lots of practice, I learned to distinguish between the late night knocks that meant, "baby about to happen," and other kinds of knocks.

One night, as I was drifting off, I got a jarring knock.

The kind that—like a certain ring of the phone—makes you feel the sky may be about to fall.

As it turned out, a thief was breaking into a downstairs apartment and the resident, seeing him come through the window, fled the apartment and headed straight for my door. By the time I got down there he was gone.

A thief in the night...something frightening...something we can neither predict nor fully anticipate... something beyond our ability to control.

Paul and Jesus both use this imagery of needing to be watchful, awake, aware, vigilant. Advent, at least in part, then, has this kind of adrenaline-pushing quality to it. Something's going to happen—be ready!

But isn't that precisely the problem? We CAN'T always be ready. If being constantly ready for all of life's surprises is the be all and end all, then I for one, am quite ill prepared.

Because just when I think I've got things under control, then a trip to the emergency room knocks me down, or an old habit I thought I'd gotten rid of finds its way in the back door, or the anxiety of uncertainty about the future clouds my horizons and I end up paralyzed about which way is up and what I'm going to do about it.

The truth of the matter is, we can't prepare or purchase our way to peace of mind no matter how many drills we practice or no matter how close by we keep our change of clothing. Because ultimately, preparation for the biggest events of our lives comes not through acts of will, but through acts of faith.

Advent is first and foremost, then, a season of faith. For it is faith—putting our trust in the One who is worthy of trust—that enables us to look the world square in to eye without retreating between the bedcovers.

There's a larger drama unfolding in this universe, and the arc of that drama is long.

God is leading that drama in ways that are beyond our ability to decipher or to know. But with the eyes of faith, we can see glimpses of the direction its heading, and with the eyes of faith we can see that God's promises can be trusted, and that God's accompaniment with us in Jesus is not a cause for alarm but a tender mercy.

Within days after speaking to his disciples about end times, Jesus' life journey came to a sudden, shocking end on the cross. For three days it seemed to both his enemies and his friends that all he'd taught and showed them had died, too. But on the third day, the empty tomb proved them wrong. The final words to them as their risen Lord: I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS—TO THE END OF THE AGE.

As we begin this season, and a new church year, we hang our hopes on God's design. We peer beneath the brokenness and superficiality of what this season has become, and look for the eyes of Emmanuel, and for his light.

Waiting, watching, keeping vigil, ready once more to be surprised by God's infinite love making it's way into our world in ways we least expected.

AMEN.