

An Unexpected Hour

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*First Sunday in Advent (A)
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Text: Matthew 24:36-44

The first thing I want to say about this morning's scripture is that I don't like it. These words hit my ears as a jarring intrusion. In our household, Thanksgiving weekend is when we get out the Christmas decorations and start getting ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We put on Christmas music. Often we buy our Christmas tree and put up the ornaments. It's the beginning of a season of coziness and warmth and light. We've begun counting down the days until Christmas—only 24 now—and the coming weeks are filled with concerts and dinners and holiday celebrations around town.

So I don't like the gospel lesson. In a season when it seems like the whole world is preparing for December 25, Jesus says, "No one knows the hour." In a season when we gather with family and friends, Jesus says, of two people gathered, "One will be taken, and one will be left." In a season of busy activity, Jesus talks about people swept away in the midst of life. What is this? This text is not about Christmas. It's not about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, but his coming at the end of the age.

I'm not ready for that, are you?

But maybe that's the point. The baby Jesus was laid in a manger, because there was no place for his family to stay. In a world that was ready for Jesus, that wasn't caught up in its games of privilege and power and pretension, no mother should have been forced to give birth so far from home and without a proper shelter. Or think of how King Herod reacted to the news that there was a newborn king in Bethlehem, lashing out fearfully and violently at all the children in the city. And what about how the powerful people in Jerusalem treated an innocent man, God's own Son, when he came to visit. They weren't ready. Are we?

And yet the ache, the longing for something better is there. It was there with Isaiah, as he looked around at a world torn apart by war, as he foresaw the invasion of his own nation by a powerful enemy, and yet dared to give words to a vision God had given him of swords being beaten into plowshares. Isaiah lifts up this amazing, wonderful future, so different from the reality he can see around him, and then he reaches out to his people and says, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Maybe we need to see that future so that we *want* to walk in God's light. In order to hear Isaiah's warnings, in order to change their ways, God's people need to know that God's vision for this world is so much better than anything we could plan or imagine. Look around you and see the world as it is, Isaiah says, with wars and divisions and suffering. It's not supposed to be like this! If you go deep, deep into reality, into the world as God made it to be, it's meant to be a place where people find fullness of *life* by following God's ways, and that when they do this they're at peace with themselves and one another. And when you start realizing that this is God's intention for the world, it shakes you out of cynicism and hopelessness, because *the*

world isn't supposed to be like this.

There's this bumper sticker out there that I've seen. It says, "Jesus is coming! (Look busy!)" We laugh because we know that there are some things about ourselves that we'd change if we knew when Jesus was coming. Maybe we'd be more generous. Maybe there are some destructive habits we'd give up. Maybe we'd let go of some of the anxieties we carry and become more joyful and free. It's not that Jesus would think any more or less of us. Look, your mother-in-law probably doesn't care about the dishes in the sink, but you still want to clear them out before she gets there, right? Preparing for a guest is about honoring the one who's coming, about showing respect and making the guest feel special. What would you do, if you knew Jesus was coming? What in your life would you change to honor him?

And what are the things you want to change, but can't? Can you name all the wounds deep inside you, or are there tangles in your soul too tight to unwind? And what about the bigger injustices—the racism, war, and genocide that are part of the water we swim in as human beings? Are you ready to welcome Jesus? Is our world ready? Or are there some things we just have to offer up to God? Look around and see the world as it is. Look to the scriptures and see the world as God intends it to be, as it *will* be because God has promised it. Look and see now. Look and see then. Look and see *here*... and *there*. The *here* and the *there* are two vastly different seasons, two unbridgeable moments in the story of our world. How do you get from here to there? Or is the *there* so different, so unexpected, that you lose hope.

That gap between *here* and *there* is the reason for the season of Advent. We need to sit with that discontent and let it become part of us. That's not easy for people surrounded by modern conveniences. At a whim I can download a song I like with my smart phone and play it within seconds. With enough money, I can scratch any itch I have, or fix any problem I see. But Advent is about living in the *now* with expectation and yearning and aching. It's about feeling our need for God's presence, our emptiness, our brokenness.

I asked you a moment ago to think about the things in your life and in our world that you'd change if you could, in order to honor Jesus. It's natural for you to start immediately deciding that you're going to do something, but it's also OK if you're not ready for that step just yet. If that's the case, then this week I want to invite you to sit with the discontent, to sit with the unanswered question, to sit with the *gap*. If your life or our world is a house that's getting ready to receive Jesus, I want you to let yourself be troubled and disturbed by the dirty dishes piling up in the sink and the dust collecting on the bookshelves. I also want you to go deeper, to see the cracked and straining foundations of the world we've built, and remember the words of the psalmist: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor build it in vain" (127:1). There are some things about us, there are some things about our world that are cracked and broken beyond our human ability to fix, and so as we prepare to receive Jesus at Christmas, we know that we're awaiting not just a guest, but a Savior.

That's why Advent is about waiting for the unexpected. The future God is bringing is not just unexpected because we don't know when it's coming, as Jesus reminds us in today's gospel lesson. It's unexpected because it upends all of the expectations we've come to believe about how the world has to be. Advent is about touching the deep hurts and needs, feeling the ache, so that we can sing the words of the ancient hymn with passion and longing:

"O come, thou dayspring, come and cheer / Our spirits by thine advent here; / Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, / And death's dark shadows put to flight. / Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel / Shall come to thee, O Israel!" Amen.