

Last year's holiday season was so busy that I didn't manage to put up my Christmas tree until December 23rd. Not this year. I promised myself that this year I was going to get a full season of holiday cheer, so I decorated the tree the day after Thanksgiving. I plugged in the lights, made a cup of hot cocoa, turned on the fireplace, and then I sat down to write this sermon...on a gospel text that doesn't put me in the holiday mood at all. But that's Advent: it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go...except in here, where the color of the season is blue, not red and green; and the hymns aren't Christmas carols, at least not yet; and instead of angelic birth announcements or journeys to Bethlehem, we read from almost the end of the gospel, Jesus' examples of Noah's flood and thieves in the night and not at all about the nativity. What happens in here is very different from what happens out there—even though we're all presumably getting ready for the same thing.

In Advent we celebrate Christ coming to us in history, mystery, and majesty—that is, Jesus' birth in first century Judea, Jesus' presence in the water, bread, and wine of the sacraments, and Jesus' eventual return for which we still wait. However, we don't give equal emphasis to those three ways that God, Emmanuel, is with us. We might be least inclined to think of Christ coming to us in communion as an Advent theme because we celebrate the eucharist all year long. We might be most likely to think of Advent as preparation for celebrating Jesus' birth, since even the secular world is getting ready for Christmas. But then Advent begins by looking forward to the end—the coming of the Son of Man, at a day and hour that no one knows—not the angels, not the Son himself, but only the Father. Jesus quite plainly tells his disciples that nobody knows when he'll return, though that has never stopped Christians from trying to guess.

Years ago I had a pretty scary dream about the end of the world, but I wouldn't say that's a theological topic that keeps me up at night. Matthew's community probably felt differently; in those first years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, most believers expected Jesus to return any day, before they lived out the span of their natural lifetimes. 2000 years later, we don't wait with the same urgency and expectation that Jesus will come tomorrow, or Tuesday, or whatever the next date is that a charismatic cult leader predicts. In recent Christian history, a lot of attention has been directed at trying to figure out where we stand on God's timeline; from those efforts we've gotten the theology of rapture and people being left behind while others are taken to heaven. That idea sells a lot of books and movie tickets, but we'd be hard-pressed to find it in scripture; in fact, until about 200 years ago, nobody read scripture that way at all. If we pay careful attention to Jesus' metaphors here, the field hands and the mill workers who are taken are compared to those in Noah's day who were swept away by the flood. Jesus really doesn't paint a picture of unrighteous people getting left behind.

As if that analogy wasn't confusing enough, Jesus compares the coming of the Lord to a thief breaking into a house in the middle of the night. That sounds like something we'd want to prevent, not something we'd want to welcome. So as usual, Jesus' parables are not quite as straightforward as we are sometimes led to believe. But when he's not making weird comparisons, when instead he gives direct instructions, Jesus says, *Keep awake and be ready...not, try to guess when.* Any effort that we expend interpreting signs or guessing when the next chapter of God's history book will be opened is misplaced; *no one knows*, Jesus says. *You do not know on what day your Lord is coming...the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.* So always be ready.

We don't know when, but we are promised that Jesus is coming, and that's a good thing. I'm reminded of the movie trope where teenagers throw a party that gets out of hand, and their parents return early to a destroyed house. It's not a bad thing that the parents came back; the kids surely expect their parents to return; they just weren't ready for them to walk into a mess that they were still actively making. Neither in Advent nor in Lent nor any time of year are we expected to fix our spiritual mess before we can receive Jesus. Grace is God coming to *us* because we *can't* fix all the messes we've made. But neither do we want to be found trashing the place when we are called to account. We're not irresponsible movie characters, trying to figure out how much time we have to get into trouble before we get caught; we are saints called in baptism to live in the way of Jesus. We know we're not perfect, and we're not going to be, but we hope that God finds us engaged in kingdom living—that we're caught doing good by the One who teaches us what is good.

And that takes us back to how what happens in here is different than what happens out there, that is, that what God teaches is good is not always what the world defines as good. The vision of Isaiah from our first reading foresees a day when all people shall seek the Lord, that the Lord *may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths...and when that happens, they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...neither shall they learn war any more.* Can you imagine a world where instead of amassing more weapons to kill people, we build more farm equipment to feed people? That's God's vision for the world; that's the majesty of Christ for which we wait.

I love the Christmas season and all the cultural trappings that come with it. My tree is trimmed; I'm ready to go. But we need Advent to slow us down and remind us that we're not just waiting to commemorate the historical birth of Jesus; we're preparing for the world-changing coming of Christ who calls us to live as subjects of a very different kind of kingdom. At the store yesterday I heard the familiar bell ringing of the Salvation Army volunteer, but Advent teaches us to long for so much more, for the ringing of the hammer on the anvil, beating those swords into plowshares, for the world as God created it to be. On the day of the Lord's coming, may we be found *already* striving for that kingdom to which we are called and which God has promised.