

Westminster Sermon – The Mountain of the Lord’s House
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44
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Our first reading is from Isaiah chapter 2, verses 1-5. As we begin our season of waiting for the Christ Child, we read of the long years of waiting for the end of exile and the return home to Jerusalem and the Temple. Hear now God’s holy Word.

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in the Lord's paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. The Lord shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! Amen.

Each year we begin the season of Advent by reading texts we more easily associate with Holy Week. Today, in our gospel reading, Matthew chapter 24, verses 36-44, we hear from Jesus during the last week of his life. He has entered Jerusalem, cleansed the Temple, and is in the midst of a last, extended teaching that spans three chapters. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people. *"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."* This is the Word of the Lord.

The Mountain of the Lord’s House

Let us pray. Unexpected God, give us ears to hear and eyes to watch, that we may know your presence in our midst. Awaken us to your coming, and bend our angles into your peace. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I love Advent. I think most of you know how much I love Advent. In fact, I’m pretty sure my sermon for the first Sunday of Advent two years ago started with the exact same sentence. I love Advent! I love the candles and the ritual, the songs and the silence. I love the waiting and

how it continues to confound secular consumer culture. The very nature of this season defiantly resists appropriation! I love Advent.

Yet every. single. year. I am confronted all over again with how much I do not love the gospel readings for the first Sunday of Advent. The Old Testament readings are beautiful and resonant and evocative—nation shall not lift up sword against nation!—a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse—the desert shall rejoice and blossom—comfort, o comfort ye my people.

And starting in Advent Two the gospel readings are always great—that's when we get into John the Baptist, the voice crying out in the wilderness!—and when we hear of Mary, and Joseph, and the confusing and bewildering and magnificent words of hope spoken to them.

But for the first week, we always read some apocalyptic teaching from the last week of Jesus' life. The lectionary always assigns these strange, terrifying visions offered by Jesus that the mainline Protestant tradition would really just rather forget.

And this year, the season of Advent and our Christian new year open with one I've always found particularly hard to deal with, because, among other things (and I need to take a breath to make sure I get all this out correctly), this one of the very, very few places in Scripture that John Nelson Darby and the Premillennial Dispensationalists of the 19th century turned to when they crafted the idea of the rapture.

I won't make you raise your hands, but I'm pretty sure some of you were thinking about the Rapture when Matthew was read just now.

So I may or may not have been procrastinating on this sermon at some point during the week.

I wasn't going to admit this to you, but the story was too good not to share.

For as I procrastinated, I picked up a book, making excuses that since it was a Lutheran priest's memoir, surely it counted as a spiritual practice. Never mind that it's Nadia Bolz-Weber's new memoir, and that Pastor Nadia is a cranky, tattooed, recovering alcoholic misanthrope who swears like a truck driver and blogs under the name "Sarcastic Lutheran".

But at least it wasn't the rapture.

Except God is sneaky, and unexpected.

For there in the early pages of the book was an entire chapter devoted to today's gospel reading.

I took the hint.

So let's talk about Matthew and this apocalyptic teaching of Jesus'.

Whenever we encounter these apocalypses within the New Testament, it is crucial to remember that the apocalypse was an incredibly popular genre of that time period, sort of like how the blog is a popular genre of today.

And these apocalypses were always written as commentaries on the present. They were not meant to be something by which you set your watch or marked your calendar. They were a way of talking about what's going on RIGHT NOW by throwing it forward into the future so that readers could get some distance and some perspective.

And the beautiful thing about having these apocalypses as part of our Scripture is that we don't have to worry about timelines or figure out some hidden deadline. Instead, this living Word of God is still talking about the present, our RIGHT NOW, not just that of late antiquity.

And when we look again at the reading from Matthew, the Rapture is only there if we bring it with us. Yes, it says that one will be taken and one will be left, but that is all it says. Jesus does not say whether being taken is better than being left, or where exactly those taken have gone. He is silent on why anyone's been taken or left at all.

Instead, this entire apocalyptic teaching on the coming of the Son of Man paints a vivid picture of complete and overwhelming chaos. Jesus repeats over and over again that nothing is known, that nothing is expected. No one knows! They did not know in the time of Noah. You do not know. People are disappearing without reason or warning. The home owner did not know. No one knows anything.

Complete chaos. Complete unpredictability. Utter confusion.

And that could easily be our **right now**. We are going about our lives, eating and drinking and living in the most ordinary and mundane of ways, and yet we are flooded with the unexpected, flooded with so much we do not know and cannot understand.

Our neighbors beside us disappear unexpectedly, without evident reason and with very little warning. They are taken by illness, by addiction, by crisis, by political viewpoints we cannot even begin to fathom.

And how easy, how tempting it is to fall asleep in response. To numb ourselves and sedate ourselves to protect ourselves from so much that we cannot understand or know or control.

Yet Jesus calls us to resist that temptation, and to keep awake, and to be ready, to be alert to God's movement in the world and the coming of Christ's kingdom.

The chaos and confusion of our gospel reading seems at odds with our reading from Isaiah, a reading often quoted for its vision of peace and unity. All nations come together in harmony to learn the ways of peace! There is no confusion, there is no chaos. There is instead a gentle invitation into a vision of literal world peace.

But surrounding this reading is the exact overwhelming chaos of our gospel reading, for the prophet Isaiah is speaking to the people of Israel as they face war, defeat, and captivity. Isaiah mostly saves his words of comfort for later chapters, but here, tucked into curses and harsh judgments against them, the prophet offers this vision of God's kingdom. Isaiah assures them that there is the promise of peace within the chaos, that even times of overwhelming confusion are pregnant with possibility for the future.

And I say pregnant very intentionally, for this is Advent, and we are beginning our wait for the Christ Child.

Even though our present can feel an awful lot like that described by Matthew, overwhelming and confusing and completely out of our control, Isaiah reminds us of the promises of God. Isaiah points us back to the pregnant teenager who faithfully and trustingly carried the promise of love and redemption, and Isaiah shows us the transformation of the world that will come at the end of our waiting.

And Christ calls us to keep awake to these promises! To keep awake to the movement of God in our world, to the movement of God within us, for we are each pregnant with possibility, each full of the beginnings of God's kingdom, each able to transform and be transformed. What are you carrying? For what are you waiting? What are you bringing into the world?

In the midst of our chaotic, confusing world, keep awake! For the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, and we must be awake to bring these promises into being.

And I would have stopped there, if Pastor Nadia and her chapter on this reading from Matthew hadn't shown me something else.

Pastor Nadia speaks of how this passage always makes her want to write an Advent list. Unlike a Christmas list, in which we list the things we would like to receive, Pastor Nadia muses on the benefits of listing everything we would like Jesus to steal from us. After all, in this passage, Jesus compares the coming of the Son of Man to a thief in the night, breaking into someone's home.

So, she goes on to say, if Jesus is going to break into your home or heart at some unexpected time, what do you want him to take? What unsorted piles or resented possessions do you want him to sneak out of your house late at night? What habits, what addictions, what fears would you happily let Jesus steal from you?

And I chuckled along at her mental image of Jesus, the holy thief, skulking around Advent with a heavy sack of all our resentments and anxieties and disappointments and everything else we've never been able to get rid of on our own.

I nodded along as she railed against the idea that losing things, that having something taken from us, is always a bad thing, especially during this season when we are attacked in every direction by the push to consume and buy and possess.

And then I gasped, and read the Isaiah passage again.

For as Isaiah points us toward the peace of God's kingdom, Isaiah speaks of the transformation of sword into plowshare and spear into pruning hook.

And in that transformation something must be lost.

For the transformation to happen at all, something must be taken away.

In order for this promise to be fulfilled, for God's kingdom to be brought into this world, we must give something up.

And this is terrifying, for in our culture we are told that we can and should have it all and be it all, even if we must exhaust and deplete ourselves to do so, that there is always more stuff or more accomplishments with which to fill us up.

And this is terrifying, for Isaiah tells us we must let go of unexpected things, of possessions and feelings and attitudes we hold very dear—our swords and our spears, instruments that help us feel secure, and safe, and in control.

We must let Jesus the holy thief take away everything we use to hurt others and ourselves, no matter how comforting those tools and defenses might be.

For only then can they be beaten into plowshares and pruning hooks. It is only in that loss that we can make tools of cultivation and nurture and peace.

So keep awake. The world is frightening. The world is chaotic. The world is confusing, and there is so much we do not know.

But keep awake.

The light is still shining in the darkness.

Keep awake to God's movement around you. Keep awake to God's movement within you. This Advent season, as we wait together in hard places and in joyful ones, keep awake to what must be lost for God's kingdom to be found.

We are each full of the beginnings of the God's kingdom; we are each able to be changed by the redemptive love for which we waiting—so let your swords be taken from you.

The mountain of the Lord's house is a place of transformation, where unexpected burdens are given up so that love might be gained.

So come, let us go up that highest hill, to the mountain of the Lord's house. Maybe we'll get there by Christmas. Maybe we won't. But let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, carrying the beginnings of transformation with us and within us.

And as we go, keep awake! For God does the unexpected, and God is moving.