

Sermon – “Being Ready”
Sunday, December 1, 2019
Scripture Readings: Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44
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We have arrived at the first Sunday in the season of Advent, a season of expectation, preparing for the arrival of Christ. Our first reading comes from the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 13, verses 11 through 14. Listen now for God’s word to you:

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

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Our second reading for today is from the Gospel of Matthew, and comes from the middle of a speech Jesus gave to his disciples, where again the theme is expectation and preparedness. Hear God’s Word in Matthew 24 verses 36 through 44.

³⁶ “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, or the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

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In all three years of the Revised Common Lectionary, apocalyptic texts are assigned for the first Sunday in Advent. We every year begin this season with an always-slightly-jarring reminder that Advent is a season of expectant waiting for both the first *and* the second coming of Christ. I am sure this is a good thing, because it breaks us out of the tendency to see Christ’s arrival in the world only as something that happened once as a charming event of a long-ago time; a beautiful intervention of God, but one consigned to the past and celebrated today only as a commemoration. We are reminded by hearing such readings as these that no, our Advent outlook is not one of mere sentimentality; it is one of looking toward our own future as well. This is important and valuable, because the state of our world is clearly one still awaiting something, still in need of transformative rebirth.

But what does it mean to anticipate such a thing as the coming of Christ? Scariness? Reassurance? Both at the same time, somehow?

I call here upon a third text, an apocalyptic passage with all the urgency of any prophet's warning; an excerpt of a manuscript you almost surely have heard, one which tells a tale of chaos and worries of the coming judgment. We join late in the story of the Cat in the Hat, after a mess of disastrous proportions is already well underway:

"Now, here is a game that they like,"

Said the cat.

"They like to fly kites,"

Said the Cat in the Hat.

"No! Not in the house!"

Said the fish in the pot.

"They should not fly kites

In a house! They should not.

Oh, the things they will bump!

Oh, the things they will hit!

Oh, I do not like it!

Not one little bit!"

Then Sally and I

Saw them run down the hall.

We saw those two Things

Bump their kites on the wall!

Bump! Thump! Thump! Bump!

Down the wall in the hall.

...

Then those Things ran about

With big bumps, jumps and kicks

And with hops and big thumps

And all kinds of bad tricks.

And I said,

"I do NOT like the way that they play!

If Mother could see this,

Oh, what would she say!

Then our fish said, "LOOK! LOOK!"

And our fish shook with fear.

"Your mother is on her way home!

Do you hear?

Oh, what will she do to us?

What will she say?

Oh, she will not like it

To find us this way!"

"So, DO something! Fast!" said the fish.

"Do you hear!

I saw her. Your mother!

Your mother is near!"¹

¹ *The Cat in the Hat*, by Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel), published 1957.

We have all been there, have we not? Except we probably needed no help from a mischievous cat to get ourselves in a fix before our parents arrived back. A trip, and a drop, perhaps, and a pair of suspiciously familiar headlights at the end of the street, and suddenly nobody quite remembers why it was desirable to get out the good china plates for a game of Frisbee—and it's not fair, we took precautions in the form of the cushions and soft stuffed animals strewn everywhere about the floor—but never mind, the question now is can all the pieces be shoved under the couch faster than the garage door rises to make room for the entrance of our sure and certain doom!

Readiness. Both of our passages today are about readiness.

They also both start in the middle of a conversation. We first heard from Paul's letter to the Romans, where we were dropped right into chapter 13, verse 11. "Besides this," it begins, leaving us to wonder: What is the "this"? Good question. If we back up and get a running start from the previous chapter, we discover that Paul is taking us through a discussion of being transformed and being one in Christ. He gives instruction on faithfulness, earnestness, zeal, grace, empathy, and overcoming evil with good.² He talks about being "subject to the governing authorities."³ He finishes off his case for being fully transformed in this way:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now 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. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.⁴

So Paul is talking about transformation, and the beginning of our passage is where he shifts from general instruction on love and faithful living to an appeal to us to have full awareness of the moment and its urgency. The time is late, he is saying, and the time for distractions, for going down pointless, foolish, harmful, or otherwise unwise paths, is over. Forget about all that. Put it aside. Daytime is upon us, and it is time to stop messing around in dreamland or in the sort of licentious atmosphere disconnected from reality that nighttime sometimes provokes in the human spirit, and live as in the daylight.

Paul tells us to quit our dissolute and disrespectful behavior, but he does not speak as a legalistic, restrictive, and prudish rulemaker shaking his finger at us from atop a moral pedestal. For him it is simply a matter of this clear fact: We have been given purpose and only a short time. To what shall we devote that time? To the worthless things which will shortly be swept away altogether? No, he says, such things need only to be dropped. Don't allocate them space or resources in your life anymore, Paul firmly instructs, nor treat them as if they should get attention or be bothered with at all.

² See Romans chapter 12.

³ See Romans 13:1-7.

⁴ Romans 13:8-14 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

For the end is near, we are reminded. And indeed, it is true: whether we meet Christ in his Second Coming or upon reaching our own expiration dates upon this earth, we have but a few days. “Your mother is on her way home! / Do you hear?” said the fish in Dr. Seuss’s fanciful tale of the Cat in the Hat. “Oh, what will she do to us? / What will she say? / Oh, she will not like it / To find us this way!”

But there is a very interesting feature of Paul’s language here. It is natural for us, just like the children who have made a mess of things, to slip into regarding the arrival of the father or mother only as a threat and a danger. But Paul does not put it that way here. What is the reason he gives for urgency?

“For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers,” he says.⁵ Judgment may be hinted at, and is more than hinted at in the text from which our second reading is drawn, but here primacy is given to the other fundamental characteristic of God’s arrival on the scene. Not “For judgment is nearer to us now,” but “For salvation is nearer to us now.” “*Soteria*” is the word used. It means “salvation,” “deliverance,” “safety”, or “preservation.” In other words, if you are paying close attention to the phrasing of this particular apocalyptic teaching, it does not read like a warning, but as an appeal to recognize that the rescue mission is on its way, and it is foolishness to be fiddling around with anything other than being up and ready for the rescuer to arrive.

Don’t let us forget that when we kids have made a mess of things, for our mom to show up is not *only* something which we fear, it is also something which offers great relief, for when things are too broken for us children to put back together, or one of us is hurt, or we are otherwise in over our heads, the ultimate arrival of the one who can fix again things that are beyond our repair is an intense relief.

Moreover, these behaviors Paul strongly insists are we discard are things which tie us down to the place from which we are supposedly hoping to be rescued. Are we going to pursue further entanglement in the mess from which we need rescue, treating the mess as the thing we value and cling to, and the coming rescue as nothing much to believe in or care about, or will we look to the coming rescue in hopeful expectation, trusting that it will come and treating everything else as if it is nothing much to believe in or concern ourselves with?

And our other passage for this morning? The Matthew text launches right in with, “But about that day and hour no one knows.”⁶ “That” day? Which day is that, exactly? Jesus here has just declared an ominous prophecy regarding the destruction of the temple, and is now in the middle of a lengthy answer after having been asked, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”⁷

⁵ Romans 13:11b (NRSV).

⁶ Matthew 24:36a (NRSV).

⁷ Jesus has just finished a long set of “woes” to hypocrites and those who lead while being blind, in Matthew 23, and then comes to a warning about the destruction of the temple in Matthew 24:1-2, which prompts the above question from his disciples in Matthew 24:3 (NRSV).

He has pointed out that there is a lot which can look like the end of things, that there are a lot of pretenders to the title of Messiah, and that we shouldn't be fooled by all the nonsense and led astray. He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man being "as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west," an instantaneous and sudden thing.⁸ We may recognize the signs which say it is near. "But," as we heard today, "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, or the Son, but only the Father."⁹ So we simply must be ready. It will intrude upon us in the middle of the carrying out of our daily lives.

And so we have known it to do, even in the one-by-one way the world has experienced so far—the car accident or the heart attack is a bolt of lightning from nowhere. As for the full-on end of the world? The same, it seems—at any moment, and not something for us to know, but something for us to be ready for. It could come upon us right now, in this very moment! ...or perhaps we'll have to wait just a bit longer.

What is important is for us to "be ready," to quote Jesus, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."¹⁰ But what, then, does that mean? If you really want to consider that question, I would advise reading and pondering carefully all the words which follow today's reading through the end of Matthew chapter 25, where Jesus teaches at length about that subject in a whole series of parables.

For now, we will content ourselves with the very first answer Jesus gives about readiness.

"Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."¹¹

This, unlike the Romans passage discussed before, does venture into the scary side of things as well as the reassuring side. So let us be warned. But let us not make the mistake which is oddly easy to make upon reading such words; that is, getting so caught up in worrisome attention to the warning of danger that we fail to pay attention to what we are being warned to *do*.

Who is ready here, and who is not? The parable describes the faithful and wise slave found at work when his master arrives, contrasted with the wicked slave who perceives a delay in his master's arrival and lives completely out of accord with his master's wishes, until he is come upon suddenly when the master does appear. But here is something very interesting? What are the master's wishes? What does being "found at work" mean?

⁸ See Matthew 24:4-35 (quote above is as translated in the *NRSV*).

⁹ Matthew 24:36 (*NRSV*).

¹⁰ From Matthew 24:44 (*NRSV*).

¹¹ Matthew 24:45-51 (*NRSV*).

It isn't just about following arbitrary commands. The work of the first slave, who has been put in charge of the household, is described as being "to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time". And the wicked slave is the one who takes advantage of the absence of his master to beat his fellow slaves. In other words, the very first thing Jesus points to when he warns us to be ready and at work when he arrives is the work of making sure those around us are properly provided for; for that apparently is one of the primary purposes for which the master has given us charge over the things we have charge of.

So let us start there. Here we are, in our season of thanks-giving and gift-giving. Let us be found hard at work giving both. The time is short, and there is none of it to waste getting bogged further down in the greed, the disregard for one another, all the things of this world that have put us in the position to need the savior who will come to judge, and bless, and punish, and set things right once more. We heeded our lesser impulses and had the party while the parents were gone, and it all has gotten way out of hand, and destructive, and we regret the state of things immensely, and we know we are very much in for it, but even as our sense of alarm gets ever higher as the clock moves quickly and our hope of cleaning it all up dissipates, so increases our odd sense of relief, that we can finally own up to our misdeeds, find some kind of reckoning and seek some kind of forgiveness, and be done with this whole disaster.

For Advent is upon us, and Advent is not just a memory of the hopes of an ancient people. It is not just sweet memories of anticipating baby Jesus being born a long time ago. It is that story of ancient anticipation pointing us at something for right now. Advent is *today's* hope for tomorrow. It brings urgency, with warning and the promise of rescue. We live it out by taking up the work of readiness: the work of living with those around us as if our rescue is imminent...for it is! Thanks be to God. Amen.