

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, November 27, 2022

1st Sunday of Advent/Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5

Second Reading: Romans 13:11-14

Gospel Reading: Matthew 24:36-44

Sermon Title: “Wake Up! - Hope Is On The Way!”

Theme

Jesus describes his second coming as a sudden, turbulent event that will bring about deep change to our normal, day-to-day lives. Therefore, he urges people to stay awake, be aware, and wait expectantly, because the Son of Man will come unannounced.

Texts:

First Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5

¹The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In 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.

³Many 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 he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴He 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.

⁵O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Second Reading: Romans 13:11-14

¹¹Besides 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Gospel: Matthew 24:36-44

[Jesus said to the disciples,] ³⁶“About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Sermon

Whenever there's any kind of celebration or important occasion, joyous or solemn, there is usually a considerable amount of preparation to do beforehand, which only those involved in the preparation can fully appreciate. Ask Mike Bundy, who has had a theme in place for Advent and Christmas decorating for months and has had the calendar for decorating in the Weekly for weeks.

Think of the preparation for a wedding, a surprise party, or a special commemoration for someone. Things don't just happen by themselves. Without adequate preparation, our occasions might suffer and the celebrations don't quite live up to expectations. Preparations often begin weeks, months, even years before the actual event.

This last year we witnessed the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II and we learned that she and her staff had been preparing for her funeral for years so that they would be ready when the day came. And as big an affair as it was, we can understand why that much preparation was needed.

This is a good time for a commercial. Everyone should have funeral plans in place to some degree. As Jesus said about his return, ³⁶"About that day and hour no one knows." Likely, we will not know when our end is near, and even if we did, we probably wouldn't be in a condition to plan, so we should plan our own funerals while we are able, including the details we want, and make that the last gift we give our loved ones. I know when I die, there will be much grief and sobbing and despair, and I want to prevent my survivors from buying the gold and diamond-encrusted casket that they think I deserve. I can prevent that by planning my own funeral and relieving my despondent loved ones of that burden.

Back to preparations in general, sometimes we can get so wrapped up in all the preparations that we almost forget the thing we are preparing for. Sometimes, it can all get so stressful that we forget that we're looking forward to something very happy – those involved in wedding preparations are particularly prone to this. And it is quite often the case that preparations can be so daunting, that there can be so much riding on the success of the preparations, that the people involved in the celebration become nervous wrecks that things will not turn out just right.

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According to the church's liturgical calendar, we have just entered a new church year with the beginning of the season of Advent. This is a time during which we look forward to something exciting and prepare carefully for that exciting thing because we want it to be just right.

Now, if I were to ask you what we are looking forward to, I would expect that the first answer that most of you would give me is Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, God's Messiah. You would not be wrong, but only half right. However, people *out there*, outside of the Christian faith and the church can't even begin to articulate that. The notion of God becoming flesh in the person of the baby Jesus, who came to dwell among us and free us from our bondage to sin, cannot be articulated *out there* and has long been lost, and replaced with an excuse to party.

But for those of us who are committed to the Christian faith and its teachings, Christmas is only one of two events we are looking forward to at this time of year. The second, and, to be clear, the more important event is Jesus' promised return ushering in the end of the present age, which, I admit, doesn't really have the same instant appeal as parties, presents, and fruitcakes. We could discuss just how we should celebrate his return, but I think we would conclude that the celebration of Advent is the way the church intended it, and then marketing and Santa Clause took over.

Of course, *we* all know that Jesus's promised return should have our attention because, after the birth, public ministry, death, and resurrection of God revealed in Jesus Christ, it is the most important event in Christian history. Moreover, we his followers believe that it will be the most important event in the history of the *universe!*

Everything in the life of the incarnation, the Word made flesh, everything in the history of the Christian faith, everything in our lives, has been prepared for the end of the present age - and that is because the end of the present age is not *the end*; when the present age is ended, we enter into the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

To be clear, we live in the Kingdom of God presently, but it is not in its fullness. When Jesus Christ returns and brings the present age to its conclusion, we will enter into the fullness of the Kingdom of God, and that is when we live into all the

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beautiful passages that describe, heaven, eternal life, the return to the Garden of Eden, whatever metaphor you prefer.

It's all very exciting. Trust me, it will be far more exciting than parties, presents, and fruitcakes. The problem is the preparations involved in getting ready for Christ's return. The end of the present age, and the fullness of the Kingdom of God seem a lot more daunting and a lot more difficult for us, than preparing for Christmas day. So we tend to ignore this aspect of Advent and concentrate on the more immediate good times that will take place in just a few weeks.

But *what if* we don't make it to Christmas this year? *What if* the present age ends next week? It might. Are you ready?

If we believe that Jesus had at least a rough idea about what was going to happen in the future, then we have to consider that possibility. The end of the present age could happen tomorrow just as easily as it could happen a hundred thousand years from now. It could happen the way Jesus describes it in the Gospel Reading.

Jesus used various images for the coming fullness of his Father's Kingdom. In the case of the rich man and Lazarus, heaven is an immediate thing that co-exists with the present age; when one dies in faith that one immediately enters it. On other occasions, Jesus talked about the Kingdom arriving in a big fanfare of trumpet blasts and magnificence and judgment. And then there's this image from Matthew's gospel.

The only way I can explain all these different accounts of the coming of the Kingdom of God in its fullness is to accept that Jesus was using the images as metaphors to impress upon us, his followers, a deeper truth about the Kingdom of God and how we should relate to it - the deeper truth being that we know very little about what the fullness of the Kingdom of God will be like. And we have no idea, at all, when it will arrive in its full glory. And don't forget, nor did Jesus. He had no idea either. So his advice was very simple. We better prepare ourselves now because we don't want to be caught like those in the days of Noah who were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage when the promised rain began to fall.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So how do we get ready? I am so glad you asked. I think we have to look back and we have to look forward. We must look back over our lives and identify those things we have done and left undone that do not live up to the example of our model of godly living, Jesus Christ. If you're anything like me, that will take you quite a while; at least the next four weeks. And when we have identified those items on our naughty lists, we need to repent of them and commit to doing better. Next week, our old arms-length friend John the Baptist will make his annual appearance and the way he taught us to prepare was to repent and make straight the path between ourselves and God's Messiah. That is the *preparation* part of Advent.

That's the easy part. We also have to look forward and that means that we have to alter our lives, both individually and in our faith community, so that we become pleasing to God.

Advent should be used by the sensible Christian as an opportunity to practice pleasing God. Not by fasting and being miserable, unless you are really called to such spiritual disciplines, but by being good people. Yes, good people. That's all that God asks of us. Be good.

- Behave ourselves.
- Show kindness to each other.
- Be generous to each other.
- Look out for each other.
- Care for each other.
- “Love one another like I have loved you.” as Jesus put it.

Paul also gave us concrete instructions in the Second Reading from his letter to the Romans. But all the good we do won't change our outcomes; we will never be good enough. Our works will never outshine the work of Jesus on the cross, but they will please God and prepare us for that day. If we use this season of preparation to prepare ourselves for the Lord's promised return then, when it happens, we will be ready.

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One thing is for certain. Christmas is a little bit of the Kingdom of God placed into our current existence; a foretaste of the feast to come. If we start preparing for the fullness of the Kingdom of God now, at the very least, we're going to have a brilliant Christmas.

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for Advent, a season through which we should prepare ourselves for Jesus making good on his promise to return. Help us this Advent to think less about gifts and cookies and decorations and more about what the fullness of the Kingdom of God will be like. And help us to develop the spiritual disciplines that will make us ready. O come, O come Emmanuel. Come and be God with us that we may live eternally with you and all the saints of every time and place.

Amen