*Sermon from the 1st Sunday of Advent, Year A*

*27 November 2022*

*St. Matthew’s Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit*

*Is 2:1-5; Ps 122; Rom 13:11-14; Mt 24:36-44*

You might be surprised in the days leading up to Christmas to see a sudden flurry around you of surprising goodness and even, from time to time, a little saintly self-denial where you didn’t expect it: total scrooges, suddenly, giving their money away to charities; consumers— consuming,… still—but buying, for others nonetheless; and, then there’s the odd, insular family, suddenly, turned-outward, serving meals together at a soup kitchen. These are all customs; things people do in anticipation of a coming time, which is signaled by the sudden appearance of tinsel in shop windows—albeit, annoyingly, I know, well ahead of the proper season.

Sure, most of this, yes, is done without much piety, but these, even good acts, that the Lord calls us to are among the “signs of the times,” as it were. This is, of course, a happier version of the “signs of the end” in these latter days… of the pandemic, which turned many people destructively inwards, which pit them against themselves or others. But, this Advent, we want to be turned refreshingly outward again, regardless of Covid’s remaining threat. In short, we want to be sent; and Advent is a good time to prepare for mission.

Today is the first day of the Christian New Year, the first day of Advent.

We, of course, think of this time as a time to “get ready,” to celebrate the Incarnation. We are right now in the time of “delay,” as it were, or better, the time of “preparation” for a still-coming day. But, we *know* when December 25th will arrive, and we’ll arrive well-prepared on that day. Stuff in the oven, stuff under the tree, a few symbolic acts of charity done. It won’t surprise you to hear me say, though, that a Second hour approaches that we need to “prepare” for, but for a time we do not know. A Second Advent. A day, though, whose coming we cannot predict or know ahead of time, as we hear Jesus say even of himself: “*But about that day and hour no one knows, either the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*.”

Up to about this point in the Gospel, the crowds have been following Jesus. His ministry has been a big hit around Galilee and Jerusalem, apart from a few hitches here and there. But by the time we get to today’s reading, the crowds have faded from Jesus’ side, and he is alone with his disciples, ascending the Mount of Olives and just as Jesus’ own, *appointed,* hour draws near. Jesus and the disciples can look across from the Mount and see the beautiful Herodian Temple standing across the Kidron Valley and Jesus prophesies destruction on it and tells of another day that is coming that points to a still more final future for Israel. “The end of the age.”

Jesus tells the disciples that the “end” time will come unexpectedly, like the flood in the days of Noah or like when a thief breaks into a house in the dark of night. He goes on to tell the disciples parables of judgement~~.~~ The primary point of them is the same as Matthew 24: 37-44, verses we just read: "*Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”* (25:13). Three of the parables, however—the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the talents, and the sheep and goats, all underline the connection between faithful stewardship and one's fate in the final judgment. Those who beat the other slaves, waste the master's resources, and fail to respond to the needs of the hungry, the sick, and the prisoners will all be cast into “*the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*.”

But when will all this happen? Jesus talks about the fate of the world’s people after his death, resurrection, and ascension and the disclosure of his Rule in and through the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. What Jesus has in view is how his power will touch peoples of the world as it extends from Jerusalem, the temple of the One true God destroyed and then raised from the dead and given all power in heaven and on earth. The disciples themselves are sent out to proclaim Jesus’ Kingdom of peace. And, Jesus talks about the effects of his power as it touches all peoples (Mt. 28:19). Some will receive the Lord as the presence of mercy long at work among them, the sheep. Then there are others who resist his mercy, as they have long done, like those goat people’s at Jesus’ left hand who gave him no food or drink or welcome or clothing or care. All people will be judged, but some will find that Judgment works to preserve and extend the just way of life they have known, while others will find the presence of the Lord disintegrating, their peoples turned against one another and dissolved, their names blotted out, their memories a byword on the earth. These are the “birth pangs” of the Kingdom’s coming felt throughout time’s passage. Still, people will go on much in their normal ways—eating, drinking, marrying, and being given in marriage, just as it was in the Days of Noah.

Therefore, Jesus bids us to “watch out.” But how are we to do this?

Jesus insists that we have a pretty radical degree of ignorance ahead of this coming Day. It’s “when.” So much that even the Lord himself says that he does not know this “hour.” And, this kind of ignorance begets in many a great deal of anxiety and fear, though Jesus also tells us that such worry will not add even a single day to our lives; worry will not “delay” the Coming “day” by even a second. So what are we to do?

We are to look to Christ and the manner by which he *is* as his own “hour” approaches.

We see in the Scriptures the coming of the Son of Man into the world, just like us, entering through the birth-bangs of Mary’s labors. Jesus matures. Attends worship in his Father’s house. As he begins his ministry, He attends not to his own will, but obediently gives himself over to the will of his Father, Scripture tells us. Such obedience, Jesus calls “love”: the way he loves the Father and the Father loves the Son (Jn 15:9-17). As he submits himself to *being* the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets, he *loves* the Father. He comes amongst us to allow the Father to fill his whole life through the Spirit.

And so, all of Jesus’ authority, he says, is *given.* As he says,“*All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him”* (Matt 11:27).

Even his words, Jesus says, are not his, but given him by his Father, who sent him (Jn 2:49–14:2). Jesus is perfect because he makes himself perfectly disposed, totally, toward the will and word of the Father.

When he teaches his disciples how to pray he tells them to pray his prayer, addressing “his Father,” as their own. And, with the promise that those who obey his Father’s-will will have loved him and so know him as a “brother.” Such intimacy, this obedience begets, that Jesus promises that we’ll share his fate, be seated with him beside the Father in heaven, when our “hour” comes.

So, as Jesus’ hour approaches, Jesus prays to his Father. Just before his arrest, Jesus prays to the Father in the Garden that He might let the hour pass, might take the cup from him. Yet, Jesus goes on, going even to death on the cross for us. He becomes himself the “first-fruit” of the resurrection, the One “exalted” by the Father above every other name, and, who, finally, continues to drink the cup in his Father’s Kingdom. By going obediently toward his hour—the Cross—we don’t see the Lord putting conditions or limits on his Father’s call, but wholly giving himself beyond all limits in love, even plunging into the very abysses of *our* being, again and again, to raise us up with him. Jesus’ whole life becomes this unrestricted “Yes” to the Father in love, that which we have so often rejected.

We see in Jesus that obedience *is* Love, the willingness to say “yes,” to total surrender to the Father’s will and truth. Importantly, in obedience, we do not see the Son engulfed, his identity denied or suppressed; rather, we see his humanity totally fulfilled. In the Son’s loving surrender to the Father’s will as the hour approached, we see not the negation of his divinity but the very fullness of divine power. As Jesus says, “*No one takes* [my life] *from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father*” (Jn 10:18).

Therefore, we see that everything that we long for, all that we hope to be, is finally given to us as a gift, which we receive in loving obedience to the will of God. We aren’t eviscerated or dimmed by this readiness to say “yes” to God’s truth. The soul’s sinful confusion, pain and yearning before the Lords’s call is only but the shadow side of the mission God lovingly offers, that which he holds out for even the most cold-hearted of us. In Jesus we see our fundamental desires revealed, that we both desire to be given to God’s call and reject it in our sin and fearful self-enclosure. But it is this tender possibility, that the divine beckoning holds out. Though God’s offer is easily spurned, it is — even if we don’t realize it — what we most deeply long for.

The promise of the Lord’s coming is not meant to turn our focus on ourselves, but to turn us toward God, which means that we do not look into the future as if looking into a frightening void, an empty horizon without sight or sound. Rather, when we look into the future, we see Jesus, the One in whom the future hour and all other hours are found and filled. For, Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the Lamb slaughtered before the foundations of the world were laid. He is the One who said “*Before Abraham was, I am*” (Jn 8:58) and the one that King David called “Lord” (Matt 22:45). So, whenever you look to the future you are meant to look to Jesus. The future is not a “what’ or a “when,” but a “who,” whose face will be for us then as we know him now.

Of the coming flames, Christ himself has already passed through. The fire of the crucible of Divine Wrath we find, on the cross, is revealed as the purifying fires of God’s Love. We have already seen “the end,” in the weak gestures of this dying man in whom we see the salvation of the world.

Just as an unknown hour approaches all of us, his disciples, this “hour” draws near for Jesus, too. The coming “end” draws us nearer then, to Jesus.

So we are turned away from predicting the future Judgement, and asked to take account of ourselves, not by looking at ourselves but by re-orienting ourselves to Christ, by sharing in his “Yes” to the Father’s word. And, because of Jesus, we have come to see that this deep dependence on God is what we see in the lives of the saints, and we see that surrender to the Spirit of Christ opens us up to the possibility of profound holiness.

So, as John said, in anticipation of the first Advent, “repent and believe!”

This Advent, look to Jesus and cast yourself into his arms, which is already, in a sense, what it means to be held by the future. Advent, isn’t about trying to anxiously peddle out a few last-minute good deeds before the approaching “end.” But is about receiving Christ and so by doing the will of his Father, he who inevitably sends us out in the form of his Son—to serve those just like us—the lost, the broken, and weak.

It is with them that the coming day will be a gift, a new time transfigured in the light of God.

So, Happy New Year! Let us look to Christ, in whose face we see the future, the new time that the Father is bringing. Let us receive this Son, the One in whom the world has already been overcome (Jn 16:33; 1 Jn 5:4).

Amen.