

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Advent 1A
St Thomas, Medina
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Holding Hope

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

What an extraordinary thing to hear on this first Sunday of Advent. What does that mean, the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour? We know exactly when he's coming, in fact we even know where he'll arrive. The Son of God, the Son of Man the baby Jesus will arrive at a stable in Bethlehem, on December 25th, right?

Our Advent scripture readings surprise me every single year. At first glance, they don't seem very – well – Advent-ish. They seem other worldly, apocalyptic even, and right about now, I really want to hear the angel Gabriel announce to Mary that she is about to become the mother of God so that God can come among us. I want to hear mother Mary saying "Let it be unto me according to your word". I am so ready to hear that the sweet baby Jesus is about to be born and that it's time to turn inward so that every heart can begin preparing him room. Could it possibly be that these ARE the things our scripture is telling us about?

Listen again. You also must be ready. Sleepers wake! Lay aside the works of darkness, clothe yourself in light. Beat your swords into plowshares, and your spears into pruning hooks and prune away every bit of dead wood that is stunting your growth. Let every heart be ready. Let every heart prepare him room.

Advent is a time of preparation, not just for the birth of the baby Jesus and God coming to be with us, but for the God who is with us already. It's a time of waiting in the quiet and the dark, journeying inward precisely so that we can be ready to act in the outer world. It's a time of longing, longing for the birth of the baby Jesus and longing for God's Holy Spirit to envelop us now. Advent begins the new church year, calling a sudden and certain halt to these many weeks of "ordinary time" we've been in since Easter. This very day launches us into new season, a new year, a brand-new beginning. In Advent, we begin again, and God knows we could use a fresh start. We need to be ready because the arrival of Advent comes with the whopping realization that God is breaking in and everything is about to turn upside down. Ordinary is over, and extraordinary is about to set in. Stay awake, be alert, because life as you've known it is no more. This can be problematic for those of us who like to hang on tight to what we know best. So... we

can hang on tight, or let loose of our certainties, knowing God has in mind abundantly far more than we could ask or imagine.

What does that feel like for you? If life as you've known it hasn't been so great, maybe it feels exciting and filled with possibilities. If life as you've known it has been pretty sweet, maybe those words are unsettling for you. But ready or not, Jesus seems to be saying, God is coming, and coming in some very surprising and unexpected ways. And not just in the manger of the Christmas morning, but in the here and now of our own stories. Exactly when will God come and make all things new? Scripture gives us the answer: the answer is right now. And not yet.

I think that's the tricky part. It's the "right now" and the "not yet" living together. We await the coming of the Christ child as we see the face of Jesus in our own child. We await a world without hunger as we bring Thanksgiving dinners to the hungry in our midst. We await a peaceful world as we recognize the violence in our own minds and hearts. We await the Kingdom of Heaven even as we pour out God's love working for justice and peace and dignity for all. Now, and not yet. No wonder we need to be ready. We need to be ready, to pay close attention, to be mindful, to be prayerful, to be truly, fully present. Being ready doesn't mean sitting idle. God's future is at hand, there is work to be done, and we can give ourselves to that good work, just like the woman grinding the meal in the gospel. She was doing the work of her daily life, AND she was fully mindful of God's future breaking into her present reality. She was alert. She was ready. She didn't miss a thing. She was ready to act as God's co-creator, partnering with God to bring the Kingdom to bear.

We can do that too, as long as we remember that the future belongs to God. The future does not belong to the politicians or the billionaires or any of the ones who appear to have all the power. The future doesn't belong to our bosses or our spouses or even our children. The future belongs to God, and our work is to find a way to partner with God in bringing God's future, God's mission, God's kingdom here among us. God can bring this future to fruition, but only if we're ready. Only if we're paying attention. And only if we take our place as co-creators in God's good work.

In this first week of Advent, we're invited to let Advent settle into us and to settle us. We're invited to create some stillness, to take our time, to relish the watching and the waiting. And we're also invited to let our waiting be an active preparation for the God who will come among us at Christmas time, the same God who is everywhere in our midst right now. Stay awake. Keep watch. Get on with the good work God has given you to do. Love more. Pray more. Let loose of needing things to be the way you want them to be and partner with God in imagining a new future. Be quiet. Pay attention. Be ready. The New Jerusalem is all around you, "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

“But about the day and the hour, no one knows...” Jesus said. And it’s true. We don’t actually know what God’s future will bring. And that can fill us with anxiety, or it can fill us with hope. Our job is to be awake, to be ready, not just for what is to come but for everything that is happening right here, right now. We cannot allow ourselves the indulgence of despair when it feels like things are coming apart. God is coming, God is here, God will always be here. Every single day, in every prayer, every small kindness, every act of justice, God is here, hope is alive, and every single one of us has a part in it. As the people of God, we have been entrusted with a vitally important job. Our job is to hold hope. As people of the resurrection, we are the ones who hold hope, who carry hope to the world. And in times when hope is in short supply, our job becomes ever more important.

Jesus reminds us again and again that the future belongs to God, but even more than that, he says our future IS God, and surely that is enough. We don’t actually need to know how every big or little thing will turn out in the end – how can we possibly know when we don’t even know the day or the hour? What we do know is that we can trust in a future that belongs to God. We don’t need to know how the details of that future will unfold, and we certainly don’t need to try to control those details. All we need to do is to partner with God – to give ourselves to the life of faith God has offered us. Really. That is all we need to do. We need only to be faithful to the God who has promised to be with us always. The God who came to us long ago as a baby boy born in a stable, the God who comes to us each day in both the suffering and the kindness of humanity, and the God who will continue to come to us in ways more marvelous than we could ever ask or even imagine. Amen.