

Sermon – Matthew 24: 36-44

Advent 1

Good morning! Today is a special day! It's the first Sunday in Advent. Today, we move into the new year of our Christian calendar when we celebrate these first four weeks with stories of the coming of Jesus. Today, we also light our first Advent candle and will mark each week of Advent with the lighting of another candle until we light our 5th candle, our Christ candle, at our midnight service on Christmas Eve. It's a time of building anticipation and excitement, even in the secular world in which we live. The shops are being decked out with Christmas decorations, Christmas songs are played in the background and all the Christmas fare is on display for the big celebration with food and wine, presents, family, friends, and all the accompanying tears and laughter.

But who is this Jesus, whose birth we are remembering and celebrating during the Advent season? Well each of our Gospel writers takes a very different approach to the Jesus story. We have just finished the Year of Luke, with his focus on the historicity of Jesus so that we might believe. Today we start the Year of Matthew, which focuses on the law and practice of the then new religion. And in trying to establish this new way, more than any other of the Gospel writers, Matthew quotes the Old Testament extensively. But the most amazing thing about Matthew, I think, is that he does not shy away from the big issues with his focus on justice and mercy for not just the Israelites, but for all people. You see, today we're not actually talking about the birth of a baby, with the coming of Jesus, we're talking about the big picture and the story of salvation.

The word "advent" is from the Latin word "adventus" meaning "coming" which is the Latin word for the Greek word "parousia" which refers to the second coming of Christ, not his birth. So, at Advent, we are in a period of waiting and preparation, not only for the celebration of Christ's birth, but also remembering that he will come again and that we are all waiting and preparing for the time when his kingdom will have no end and the pain, violence and dysfunction, that is so common in our lives and the world today, will no longer be felt. When we can walk in the light of the Lord.

And this is what today's reading is about. It's located during Jesus' last week in Jerusalem and is his response to his disciple's question about the end times and his second coming. Two simple, yet dominant, themes stand out, balancing and playing off one another.

The first theme is the sure and certain promise that God's future and our future belong with this Messiah, the Son of Man. The "that day" of the text refers back to the promise of the Son of Man's coming when he will "gather his elect from the four winds" (24:31). And then three times in this reading, at verses 37, 39, and 44, the promise of his coming underscores the surety of God's promise in this Messiah: "The Son of Man is coming".

The second theme is that of "knowing" - or actually of "not knowing." Five times it drives its point: "no one knows, not even the Son" (36); "they knew nothing" (39); "you do not know" (42); if the owner had known" (43); and "at an unexpected hour" (44). It's this theme of not knowing that is surely the key for us. The danger for every Christian community – as it must have been for Matthew's own - is that the important questions of When?, How?, Why? How can I know? do not seem to get answers. The danger is that not knowing turns either into not believing and despair, or into wild speculation and fears. And this is particularly true is today's world, with its focus on knowledge, and science, and understanding.

How do you prepare for a promise? This gospel reading balances the surety of the promise of the coming of the Son of Man - the promise of God's nearness to our world and our lives, with the not knowing, the mystery, the whens and whys that mark our lives in the meantime.

Such a promise calls us to watch, to "be awake" - not just for what is to come, but to continuous preparedness for what is already taking place in our midst. The danger is our failure in not knowing the significance of this day - that each day is lived in the promise of the Lord's nearness.

Our faith is to see the mystery and the promise of the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary routines of life, or even in those disastrous events that might make God's presence so difficult to envision. It takes imagination shaped by God's promises to see God's working in the reality of today's world. In the same way, we are called to hear and

embody the excitement, the expectation, the surety of God's promise to be near us as we live in faithful discipleship while waiting the coming of Christ our Lord. How will you prepare for Christ's coming this Advent?

Let us pray: Loving and gracious God, we thank you for your Word, your saving Son Jesus Christ. Give us strength for our journeys towards you. Equip us with the gifts that will enable us to be prepared for your coming. As we enter this season of Advent, keep us strong in your faith and alert to your love and grace. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.