

Sermon 12/2

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Advent Apocalypse

Welcome:

Good morning! I hope all is well with you as we enter the Christmas season. This Sunday marks the first Sunday of Advent, the time of preparation and reflection that is called for before the celebration of Christmas. It is a blessing to be with you this morning. To open our worship this morning, I'd like to invite you to listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah, as we begin our time of preparation, remembering God's promise of a world transformed. In the 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. Many 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. He shall judge between 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.

This morning, we are going to be reflecting on our role in the vision of the peaceable kingdom, and exploring the peace that we seek as the holiday season washes over us.

But first, I'd like to see if there are any visitors who are worshiping with us this morning. I'll bring around the microphone if you'd like to introduce yourself, or have someone introduce you, but feel no pressure, I won't call you out if it feels weird to stand up in public. My wife hates being introduced in churches too.

Welcome to you all. And now, will you stand, and join me in reading the call to worship,

#HWB 678

**Hymn**

*I know not why God's Wondrous Grace*

HWB # 338

**Children's Story**

Peppy Howard-Willms

Nursery: Kyle Hunsberger and Anneliese Baer

**Advent Candle Lighting**

Scripture: Samuel (Matthew 24:36-44)

Scripture: Rachel

Well, its Christmas time. You know how I can tell? I was working in Plowsharing last Tuesday afternoon, and one of our customers came up to me while checking out and thanked me profusely for not playing the incessant Christmas music you find in most stores these days. I told her that I was at least as grateful as she was! Not that I don't like Christmas music-Rachel and I listened to the cheesiest Christmas CD this week while decorating the tree, but I've never really been a huge fan of it in retail outlets. I'm just not feeling Christmasy right then.

I've heard people complaining about carols in congregations as well-not from any of you-yet! But I know many people-often musicians, who sigh about having to sing the same old songs before Christmas eve, at the latest. On the other hand, some people are ready before Thanksgiving! You've already learned about this advent's compromise-Christmas carols before the service for those who like, and if not, feel free to come on time. But that's a bit besides the point.

On this first Sunday of Advent, I want to talk about the connections between the celebration of Christmas in our society, and the way we often talk about the end of the world. Hang with me-I recognize that this may be a bit of a stretch. I'm going to start out with how we deal with advent currently and historically, and then we'll talk a little bit about the apocalypse, and you tell me if you think the parallels are meaningful.

So to start out with, lets talk about Christmas. I am fascinated by the celebration of Christmas in our culture. America, with its remarkable mix of rampant capitalism, affluenza, and a Christian veneer, has taken Christmas to a whole new level. Advent is almost unrecognizable in comparison to its original function.

Advent has a long and illustrious history in the church. Within a few centuries of Christ, the date of Christmas was set as December 25<sup>th</sup>, replacing a Roman solstice festival, and the four weeks before Christmas were soon afterwards designated a time of preparation at the beginning of the Christian calendar year. Advent was originally created, like all the fasts, as a part of the rhythm of celebration in the early church. Feasts, most importantly, Christmas and Easter, were celebrations of God's work in the world. But in order to celebrate the feast honestly and properly, it was necessary beforehand to purify and prepare oneself. The way this was most commonly done was through increased prayer, working on one's relationship with God directly- and fasting-giving up something of value in order to remind the believer of their dependent relationship with God, to cleanse the body of excess, and to make the feast at the end of the time of preparation that much more exuberant. The traditional color of Advent is purple, similar in shade to the deeper violet of lent, because it too is a season where

Christians were called to remember the bitterness of life-the frustration of waiting for a savior who is coming.

This seems a bit in contrast to how we often mark advent today. Rather than a time of giving up, it is the time of year when we consume the most, according to all business data. Rather than a time to reflect on our lives and our preparation for the return of Jesus, it sometimes feels to me like I spend all my energy on presentation-at this time of year, the surface of our lives are supposed to sparkle, as we force ourselves into the holiday spirit. Rather than a quiet and introspective, even somber time, we are beset on all sides with Christmas cheer, whether or not we are in the mood to be jolly. In fact, being pleasant to be around-having the holiday spirit seems to have become almost a moral duty-Santa is a saint not because of his love for children and tireless effort for those in need, but because he is happy all the time!

And, of course, these changes from the historical model have dramatic effects on our experience of the holiday.

Spending a month building up credit card debt, stuffing ourselves with unhealthy food, and using all our energy being happy is, of course exhausting. After a month of excess, moderation begins to look pretty good! Because of this, and because of the forced mood of happiness, people are often frustrated, depressed, or just plain tired of the holiday season long before Christmas arrives.

In this cultural milieu, church, rather than a place of rest and rejuvenation, can be one more reminder that we are always supposed to be cheerful, one more place that forces the Christmas spirit down your throat, one more demand on your resources.

Does that description of Christmas time resonate with you at all? From the pastor's perspective, I know the tension of wanting this season to go well and be a blessing to everyone involved.

Which is why I'm glad to get the chance to begin our advent worship services this morning talking about the call in Romans and Matthew to be prepared. Because, as people preparing for Christmas, preparing for the future, preparing for God's kingdom, I think its worth taking time to reflect again on what it looks like to be prepared. This is where the comparison between advent and the apocalypse comes in.

Both Matthew and Romans make it clear that part of what it means to be Christian is to be prepared-sort of like being a good boyscout. You have to be ready for any eventuality.

Now, the obvious eventuality that Jesus and Paul seem to be talking about is the second coming of Christ-the end of the world as we know it. Since the first years of

Christianity, people have been expecting Jesus to return, mainly because in several places in the biblical text, ranging from the obscure to the more explicit, Jesus says he is going to come back, and soon, and Paul is even more clear that the end of the world is likely coming within the lifetime of his readers, and thus we should dramatically change our behavior.

Obviously, the apocalypse has not happened yet, but that has not stopped Christians from trying to be prepared for the second coming.

Over the centuries, Christians have given up marriage and incomes, have travelled great distances, have given all their money to the poor, and have gone on crusades of brutal violence in attempts to be prepared for the second coming. But I'm more interested in how preparation for the end of the age plays out in our modern world.

In the last few decades, Hal Lindsey with his book *The Late Great Planet Earth* and his philosophical descendants, the *Left Behind* series, all have proclaimed that the signs are pointing to our life times as the one in which Christ will come again, and millions of Christians have made concrete decisions both politically and personally because of their agreement that the time is nigh. There are Christians who believe that Israel needs to continue to have control over the entire holy land because Jesus cannot return to earth if the Palestinian people have some power over the fate of Jerusalem.

There are Christians who believe that we do not need to worry about the fate of the environment, global warming, or the extinction of species, because the imminent return of Christ will render our planning for the future moot.

Let me be very clear. I do not think that this is appropriate. The dramatic changes of behavior of Christians through the centuries and the choices Christians are making today in an attempt to bring themselves in line with biblical prophecy are being irresponsible and unethical. They have misused Jesus' call to be prepared because they have ignored what it means to be prepared.

Now, its not as if the biblical text doesn't motivate action. Paul and Jesus' warnings have the tendency to spark the same anxiety in me that preparations for the holiday season often create. The sense that a huge deadline is looming, and if I don't use all of my energy to prepare for it, disaster will strike. The Biblical images are striking! Its going to be like the flood in the days of Noah-people will be wiped out without evening knowing what's going on. One will be taken, another left behind. You should be like the owner of a house who stays up ALL NIGHT worrying about the thief that is going to break in.

Are any of you familiar with the Harry Potter series? Paul sounds like Mad Eye Moody to me—a character known both for his toughness and his paranoia. Mad-Eye's motto is Constant vigilance! Be prepared for any eventuality—always stay on your toes. You never know when danger will strike.

Translated to the church, it's something like Make sure your life is in order! Be good all the time. Change your behavior, you know you're a sinner! Live every moment knowing that God might return tomorrow and the decisions you made today will be with you for all eternity.

It is exhausting just thinking about it. And I think that sort of exhaustion—running ourselves ragged in a quixotic quest to be good enough to meet our maker—is just as insidious and unhealthy when it is directed at God as it is when it is directed at Santa. I do not think exhaustion and frustration are the emotions Jesus and Paul were going for when they first suggested that we know neither the day nor the hour that God will return, and thus we ought to keep alert.

I would like to suggest, this advent season, that our motto for this month of waiting shouldn't be 'constant vigilance' or 'stay awake' but 'be mindful'.

Because when you listen to the expectations Jesus and Paul lay out for our behavior, they don't seem as onerous. Paul suggests avoiding drunkenness and orgies, and fighting with your neighbors. Really, his call to be prepared is just a continuation of his arguments in the previous verses in Romans where he repeats Christ's rule to love one another, and explains that the one who loves another has fulfilled the law already.

Jesus too doesn't ask for our exhaustion offered up as a sacrifice to impress. In the next verses, after the ones I read, Jesus explains that the servant who is not prepared for the return of their master will "say to himself, my master is delayed" and upon this conclusion "he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards." The standards of good behavior suggested here are not overwhelming either. Rather than a calling to make sure that everything is perfect for the return of God, it's more a call to make sure to remember that God is paying attention, and you're not supposed to try to clean up a life full of problems at the last minute. It's not the most effective way to be faithful. Thinking about it in reference to Christmas, it's more a call to make sure that every time friends and family annoy you this holiday season, you refrain from hitting them, not a calling to make sure that every bow in the house is in place.

So in conclusion, this advent, as we remember again the birth of Jesus so long ago, and look forward to the hope and the promise that we have received that God was with us, is with us, and will be with us, I hope that we might strive for more modest goals than a perfect holiday season and perfect lives that we can display to God upon the return of Christ. Rather, that we would try, in our own small ways, with our own

families and the people we interact with in our daily lives, to be decent. To love those who are there for us to love, to learn from those who have much to teach us, and to listen with grace to those who are in need. To pay attention to our own lives, to be mindful of our own failings, to listen to our own struggles. To be alert to our weaknesses and our own places for growth. To remember that the world will change, and you are called to live in that balance, to center yourself in awareness as a people who are awake to God's presence in the world.

We are still called to do what we can to change the world-but I pray that we might this holiday season look to find peace in the whirlwind around us and be blessed by the God who is doing new things, everyday without us even noticing or having to participate.

Amen.

Hymn

Sharing

Announcements

Offering

Congregational Prayer

God we return these gifts to you, as a symbol of our acknowledgement that all that we have been given is yours. We pray that they might be an agent of your will in the world.

We give thanks today (What do we give thanks for?)

We pray today (What do we pray for?)

We hope today (what do we hope for?)

Be with us, during this hectic holiday season. Keep us deeply grounded in your love and in your will for our lives, that we might be aware of your calling and be awake to your love

Amen

Sending Hymn

Benediction

Go.

Awake

Aware

At peace

Amen