

November 27, 2022

Year A: Advent I (Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:37-44)

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One of the first things I do when I am preparing a sermon is to go back to my archives and see what I have said about the same readings before. I have notes going back to 1993, and I have prepared sermons for the first Sunday of Advent five times. What struck me in reading over my notes is that I have always carefully avoided saying anything about the gospel reading. Because it scares me.

I am particularly bothered about the bit that says, *Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.* It bothers me because I don't like the sound of some people going and others being left behind. But more than that, it bothers me because I have met people who take it absolutely literally; people who firmly believe that when "the rapture" comes, they will be the only ones taken to heaven, and the rest of us will be doomed.

Many years ago I car-pooled for one term with an evangelical minister who tried hard every week to convince me of this interpretation. In the end I could only say that if heaven was going to be reserved for the closed-minded, uncharitable, pompous and self-righteous, then I would rather not go there, thank you.

The Biblical scholars who inhabit the big bookshelf behind my chair talk about this troublesome passage as an example of "apocalyptic eschatology", and they conclude that the point is quite simply that you can never know what's coming next or when. Just like the house owner doesn't know when a burglar is coming, and the people in Noah's time were not expecting to be wiped out by a flood.

Perhaps this makes more sense in 2022 than it might have done three or four years ago. Did any of us expect our government to shut down all the stores and restaurants and churches? Did we expect to do all of our medical consultations over the phone or zoom? Did we expect to be banned from travelling if we didn't have the right permission

papers?

Perhaps now, at the end of 2022, we are more aware than ever of how things can change suddenly and unpredictably. Perhaps now that message about staying alert and being ready because you never know what's going to happen or when, makes more sense.

So what are we supposed to do to be ready? I'm afraid the scholars in my bookcase were a bit sketchy on that. In the end, though, what springs to my mind, is a line from Douglas Adams. (*Not Douglas Adams the eminent theologian, I hasten to add, but Douglas Adams the science fiction writer who frequently cut straight to the truth of great philosophical questions.*) And that line is "Hang the sense of it and keep yourself busy."

One of my favourite prayers, written by an Irish Archbishop, says "God keep me in the presence of those who seek the truth and protect me from those who think they've found it." We mortals are never going to understand the great mysteries of life and creation, and any explanation that we can understand is bound to be wrong. The bottom line is that we have to accept that it is not given to us to know what and when, and the best way to be ready for whatever, whenever, is to keep busy working at worthwhile things.

The beginning of Advent, then, is a very appropriate time to think about waiting, getting ready and keeping busy, isn't it? In many ways, Advent is a treasure that belongs to the church. The commercial world cuts straight from Hallowe'en to Christmas. You don't see Advent promotions in any stores, and the only Advent hymns you hear are the ones that people mistake for Christmas hymns. The commercial world can't handle Advent, probably because Advent is about waiting, and waiting is not a popular occupation. Nobody looks forward to waiting. Important people don't wait. Waiting is wasting time, isn't it?

Well, no. It doesn't have to be. I have been married for 54 years to a man who has no notion of punctuality, and I've spent a lot of time waiting. One day it occurred to me that

the one thing I resented more than waiting was being so busy that I never had time to think. Then it occurred to put the two together, and one problem solves the other!

Waiting is the gift of time to think. Waiting is not a bad thing if you have something to think about, something to get ready for, something to do. And that's the kind of waiting we do in Advent. Advent is not about angels and shepherds and stars; it's about getting ready. We need to spend the whole of Advent preparing for Christmas, but not just the food and the decorations and the presents. We have to make ourselves ready to meet God.

While the everyday part of us is dealing with the baking and the shopping and the organizing that has to happen in Advent, the deep-down, centre of our being needs to prepare to meet God, to accept God's forgiveness, to recognize God's love, and to welcome God's gifts. We need to ask ourselves whether there are little pieces of darkness keeping us from God: are there guilts, or resentments, or grudges, or fears, that we need to throw away to make room for the light?

Stephen Montgomery tells the tale of being on a small ferry during a nasty storm. He was not a good sailor and was ready to lose his lunch. The pilot noticed how green he was looking, and said "Find a point on the shoreline and focus on it." Away on the rocky coast there was a lighthouse. Stephen fixed his eyes on that point and imagined himself to be on solid ground, somewhere warm and dry, and after a while, his stomach settled and he began to feel better. As long as he focussed on that point of light on the horizon, the storm around him faded.

Everyday life loads us down with burdens: we have troubles and worries and fears. Sometimes the burdens pile up and swirl around us like heaving storms. But we are called to weather the storm by fixing our eyes on the light that will draw us to itself.

When we do the work of Advent, we are not just getting ready for this one Christmas. We are getting ourselves ready to meet God anytime: whenever the distractions pile up;

whenever life takes one of those sudden turns that make no sense; whenever we are overcome by loss; AND whenever new joys bubble up in our lives as well. We are looking for that point of light, that horizon on which we can fix our eyes. This is the time of year when we need to do a little maintenance on that connection, to make sure that there is nothing blocking our view, nothing that will prevent us from being ready.

In the words of one of my favourite t-shirts: “Christ is coming. Look busy!”