

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

Today is the first Sunday of Advent.....and we know what's coming, don't we? In four short weeks, we will be celebrating Christmas and there's a lot to do in the meantime. We may be planning a trip to spend time with family or we may be preparing our house for family to come to see us. Or perhaps we will have a celebration that has nothing to do with family. We all have slightly different ideas about how we want to spend this holiday, but all of us will probably mark it in some way. While we are getting ready for this holiday, we are also anticipating what it will be like this year. That anticipation may be filled with joyful imaginings or it might be filled with a bit of anxiety if we aren't quite sure what to expect.....and it may be filled with both.

But our scripture lesson this morning seems to have nothing to do with getting ready to celebrate the birth of Christ. Instead, it is focused on the 'end times' .....the return to earth of Christ. It's apocalyptic literature which seems out of place while we are decorating our houses or packing our bags. Why do we talk about the second coming of Christ when we are getting ready to celebrate the fact that he's already come.....some 2,016 years ago? Apocalyptic literature really throws cold water on what we anticipate as a joy-filled season of preparation. And it calls into question what type of preparation we are doing.

Apocalyptic literature makes most of us squirm in our seats just a bit. It's about the end of time as we know it. It's a downer. Nobody wants to hear it while the tune to "Silver Bells" is playing in the background. But it's important to know why we start with this literature. The word 'apocalyptic' means "revelation" or "the revealing" or "removing the veil" so that we can see beyond. While we are making preparations to celebrate the inbreaking of God into the world in the birth of Jesus Christ, we are asked to remember that while Christ has already come to us, Christ has also promised that he will come again. And when he does, he will bring with him the kingdom of God and all will be as it should be. So we live now in the in between time.....the time between Christ has already come and the time that Christ will come again. So we live in the time of '**now**.....because Christ has come and is still with us.....**but not yet** because Christ will come into the world again. We are living in the midst of a work still in progress. God is still creating and we are participating. And as all of us know, in all endeavors of creation there is by necessity a certain amount destruction as a new something emerges from an old something.

Being in the midst of the destruction is anxiety producing and may even cause a grief reaction. Whenever there is change, there is loss. There's no escaping that.

The gospel of Matthew, that we heard this morning, reminds us that we don't know when Jesus will return, but we have faith in his promise to us that he will. The early Christians heard and believed the same promise. Jesus will come when we are pursuing the natural patterns of our lives. We will be working or making dinner, or running errands, or getting married, or having babies, or taking care of our friends, etc., etc., etc. We will be doing what we normally do. As we go about our daily business, we do so as if we had all the time in the world. But that's an illusion. We don't have all the time in the world. Each day that we have, each hour, and each moment is a gift and at any time it can be our last. We are encouraged then to pay attention. To be prepared. To look for the coming of Christ again. The early Christians, those who were hearing the gospel of Matthew perhaps for the first time, were losing heart. They were becoming bored and distracted. They were complacent as they went about their daily lives. Jesus' return had not come within the timeframe that they had expected and they were discouraged. We can relate!

*PAUSE*

About ten years ago, there was a series of novels written about the apocalypse called "Left Behind." The series was very popular and spawned lots of interest in a phenomenon known as "the Rapture" in which individuals were suddenly taken airborne and those standing next to them were "left behind." The implication in all of this was that those who had been rendered airborne had been taken directly to heaven and that those who had been left behind had not been saved. That imagery was taken directly from verses 40 and 41 of the gospel of Matthew that we just heard: "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." On the surface, it would seem that the interpretation is correct, but look back to verse 38 and we can see a different implication. Verse 38 says: "For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man." If we remember correctly, Noah was the one who was 'left behind' as all the others were swept away. However, Noah and his family and all the animals were actually the ones were saved. It's important to know the context in which certain verses of scripture are written. The passages that supposedly refer to the rapture are there to simply indicate the suddenness with which the coming of the Son of Man will appear. We don't actually know which one of them was saved.....the one that went airborne or the one who was left behind as Noah was. We do know that being prepared is important. We don't know when it will happen. We don't know how it will happen. That's the whole point!!

So what do we do to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man? It probably doesn't have anything to do with putting up the Christmas tree, or shopping for presents, or baking special treats, or cleaning the house for company or going to special parties. Those are the things we tend to do to celebrate the fact that Jesus has already broken into this world in the form of an infant. The question for us is, what do we do to prepare for Jesus' return?

We keep doing what we've always done. We continue to read the scriptures, to pray together and alone, to worship together, to keep Christ in mind every single day and in every action we take, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit those in prison.....and there are lots of different kinds of prisons.....to work for justice of all people, to respect the dignity of every human being, to recognize evil when we encounter it and resist it; to put God's will at the center of all we do. Nothing that Jesus taught his disciples to do has gone out of date. Those lessons and those instructions are as relevant today as they were to Jesus' audience of followers. Their world was every bit as treacherous as ours can be. The times may change, the context may change, but human nature does not change. As Christians, we are concerned with Biblical matters, but not at the exclusion of the choices we make in this world in our daily lives. What we know and believe about Jesus needs to guide all our decisions in *this* world as we prepare for the next.....whether we enter the next world through death in this one or whether we enter the next world as a result of Jesus' return to this one. We need to be prepared either way.....and we don't have all the time in the world. Today will come and will fade away into memory. Our time will come to an end. We anticipate what that will be like, but we do not know. That anticipation is an unusual mixture of both joy and trepidation. We aren't quite sure what to expect, but we know that such a day will arrive.....we just don't know when. It will arrive like a thief in the night.

We practice every day what Jesus has taught us. Each day we die a little bit more to 'self' and become more aware of our Creator. Each time we are willing to trust God, our faith becomes a little stronger. Each step we make toward lining up our own hearts and our own thinking and our own actions with those of our Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ, is our preparation for that inevitable day when we will be face to face with our Creator. And each step we take in that direction allows us to participate in the continuous effort of creation by almighty God in this life and on this earth.

Christ has come.....Christ will come again. This is our belief and it occurs in our daily living and our daily dying as we strive to live into our baptismal vows. Matthew warns us to prepare.....and prepare now.....because we don't know when the Son of Man will arrive again. We aren't expected to know everything and we aren't expected to do everything. We are expected to get ourselves ready as best we can. We are expected to be watchful. We are expected to pay attention and to be alert.

Even as we prepare to remember and celebrate the entry of Jesus Christ into the world 2,016 years ago, we need also to understand that the reminder that Christ will come again is not intended to frighten us, but to give us hope. We have not and will not be forgotten by the one who came to us, is with us, and will return to us. Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN