

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Happy New Year!!!

Yeah, I know. It's a little early for that. We won't be celebrating New Year's in the secular world for about another month. But for the church, the first Sunday in Advent marks the end of one liturgical year...we've just finished Year C and the beginning the next one.... which is Year A. We tend to think of the season of Advent as the season of preparation...the time we spend preparing ourselves for the arrival of Jesus, the Christ child. We Christians been doing it every year for approximately 2,000 years. We are looking forward to the birth of Jesus because we know he's coming...and we know he's coming soon!

The initial arrival of Jesus into the world is an earth-shattering, mind-blowing, history changing event. So why in the world do we start this season off with a gospel reading about the apocalypse...the end of the world? In retrospect, we can see that Jesus' birth in Bethlehem some 2,019 years ago meant an end to the ancient world as they knew it. After Jesus' birth, nothing was ever quite the same again. His entry into the world changed everything. And change means that something is lost even as something is gained. What was lost in that ancient world after Jesus arrived was the sure and simple belief that life in this world is all there is. What was lost was the notion that there may have been a God...a creator of all things...but that God was remote and not necessarily connected to his creation. What was lost was the belief that humanity was permanently disconnected from God. The idea that God was love and that God cared about humanity collectively and individuals personally was never considered. That was a novel idea.

So when Jesus showed up.... everything in the ancient world changed. But there is no creation without destruction. There is no change without loss. Jesus brought with him an entirely different understanding of God. He brought with him an experience of God that simply blew people away. He fed people...thousands of them at a time. He healed people...even those who were not among the chosen tribe of Israel. He taught people about God's love for them. And he instructed people about how God expected them to behave. All of a sudden, people had a sense of God as being personally connected to each of them. God was real! And ultimately, Jesus was crucified by the powerful combined forces of religious zeal and political authority...the most devastatingly dangerous combination on earth. But the greatest change

and the most powerful gift was Jesus' resurrection and his appearance to hundreds of people who testified that they had, in fact, seen him or spoken to him *after* his crucifixion. All of a sudden, the whole notion of this being the only life there is was called into question. And even as he ascended into heaven, he promised that he would come back. And we know that Jesus always keeps his promises, so we know that he will come back. But when? That's the crucial question. But we know that God's concept of time and timing is not the same as our concept of time.

We live in the in-between time...the time when Jesus was born as a baby and lived with humanity on earth for a short time and the time when Jesus will return to earth. It's already happened...he's been here...and it's still going to happen...his coming back. So what do we do in the meantime...in this in-between time?

We start every Advent season with apocalyptic scripture...the stories about the end of the world. Even as we are preparing to mark Jesus' arrival the first time...we are thinking of the time when he will return. Even as we are making preparations to celebrate his birth...we are also making preparations for his return. We know which day it is that we celebrate his birth. It's December 25<sup>th</sup>. It's the same every year. What we don't know is on which day he will return. So how in the world do we prepare for that?

Make no mistake about it. Apocalyptic literature...stories about the end of the world...are not predictions about the future. Apocalyptic literature is about the precariousness of the present. We all know that life is unpredictable. We've all experienced unforeseen disasters, setbacks and losses as well as windfalls of unexpected good fortune. This life is precarious. We don't know what's going to happen or when. We know that it is a blessing that we cannot see into the future because if we could, most of us would just crawl back under the covers and never get up again. The world is changing. Our lives are changing. The creation is still going on. And with creation, there is always destruction. You have to break the egg to make the omelet. You can't leave the paint in the can if you want it on the wall. You can't build the desk or the table or the wall without putting holes in the lumber and you can't sew a dress or a shirt without cutting the fabric. When something new happens, something we're familiar with is going to change or perhaps even be destroyed. That's the nature of creation. And the world is still in the midst of creation.

So what are we to do while we wait? What are we to do in the midst of creation? How do we prepare in a world that is perpetually passing away? We know that it will not be here forever. We know that there will be a day when there will be no tomorrow as we know it. But scripture tells us that God is building a new world. So what do we do about that?

Jesus tells us to be prepared. Get ready. He tells his followers the story about Noah...how Noah made the preparations that God told him to make. People were going about their daily lives with no notion of what was about to happen. But Noah was prepared. He built the ark and rounded up the animals...probably before it started raining...and when the waters came they were lifted above the water and the rest of the living creatures on the earth were swept away. When the water receded, Noah and his family had been left behind on earth. Noah and his family were the ones who had been saved. And they were given more work to do...to populate the earth again. Jesus tells this story to remind us about Noah and to give his listeners some insight about those who will be taken and those who will be left behind. Several years ago, there was a book series called "Left Behind." The implication in these books was that the ones who were taken were bodily lifted up into heaven and saved and the ones who were left behind on earth were the ones who were not saved but perished. In this morning's gospel, Jesus tells us that there were two in the field; one was taken and the other was left. And there were two women grinding meal together; one was taken and the other was left. But Jesus' reminder about Noah implies that the ones who were left behind were the ones who were saved. They are like Noah who was left on earth and then given more work to do as the creation continued.

Whichever way you interpret being 'taken' and being 'left' is not the point. The point is the attention to preparation. Jesus tells us to be perpetually prepared. We must always be ready. And this is not as easy as it might sound. Any of us who have ever prepared to entertain family or friends during the holidays realize how much time and energy and thoughtfulness preparation requires. Very few of us live in a state of perpetual preparation. And yet, this is exactly what Jesus is telling us to do. He tells us that he's going to come back at an unexpected hour and we need to be ready when he arrives.

So let's get back to the original question. What do we do to prepare? We aren't going to be making beds and sweeping floors and stocking the refrigerator. That's not the kind of preparation Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about where our focus lies. Are we aware of Jesus and of God every single day? Do we see God and Jesus in different aspects and experiences of our lives? Do we spend time talking to God and listening as well? Do we spend time in the scriptures? Do we look out for our neighbors? Do we even know our neighbors? Do we visit people in the hospital? Do we take the word of God's love to people who are in jail or in prison? Do we feed people who are hungry? Do we provide clothes for folks who are naked? Do we forgive those who have injured us? Do we reach out to other people to make connections with them? Do we ever tell someone a 'God story' from our own experience? Do we love our enemies...not just tolerate them? And do we do good to those who would harm us? Do we

refrain from making judgements and assumptions about other people? These are all the things that Jesus has told us repeatedly that we need to do in order to be prepared. This is how we are supposed to spend our lives in this life. And it's not easy. But it is how we prepare ourselves for being members of the kingdom of heaven...where "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21:3-4)

But Jesus said to them and to us, "You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." We don't get any advance notice, so don't be fooled by human beings who think they've figured out when the end of the world will come. Jesus himself says that he does not know the day or the hour. And if Jesus doesn't know, it's for certain that none of the rest of us do. We do, however, have something wonderful to look forward to. Jesus came to us and Jesus will return to us. He promised. And Jesus always keeps his promises, so ready or not...here he comes!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.