

Matthew 24: 36-44 “An Incomplete Advent” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/30/25

Snow globes are “freeze framed” images of life; timeless tableaux encased in glass. As shared in Children’s moment, I love their ability to spark our imagination regarding the ideal and picturesque. Snow globes were first made in France in the 1800’s and quickly became a staple in gift shops around the world. Scenes can run the emotional gamut from trivial to touching and often include angels, churches, carolers, Santa, and snowmen. But you can now get Easter bunnies, Smurfs and even Halloween depictions. Prices range from affordable to pricey with some having motorized pieces and music boxes. They appear other-worldly which is, according to biblical scholar Alyce McKenzie, exactly how folks view the stories and scenes surrounding Advent. Advent stories, at first glance, appear to be both timeless and irreverent in their storytelling. The people who show up in Advent stories don’t seem real; they are like extras from some first-century actors’ guild or frozen figures in a snow globe scene. Our challenge in Advent is to seek to do those characters justice as people who had real hopes and fears. Then they can provide a strong and viable connection to us and our daily hopes and fears.

In the Bible’s New Revised Standard Version, our text has the heading “The Necessity for Watchfulness.” It is sandwiched between Jesus’ teachings on signs that the Son of Humanity is about to arrive and a few parables that recommend being ready for that imminent judgment to come. In between we get this weird text that features people before the flood, folks being snatched while plowing fields, and a thief casing out your house, figuring out the best time to break in. A snow globe depicting such stories could include pre-flood partiers, a field with people being sucked away, or a little Thomas Kincaid cottage with a thief trying to break in. But those don’t seem very cheery and thus we recognize that a peaceful, lovely snow globe scene simply will not do to reflect the stories of Advent. It won’t represent the eye of the storm into which the vulnerable baby will be born. It doesn’t depict the danger and unpredictability of the storm into which the Divine will return. The stories of warnings and advisories that come to us during Advent seem to be out of synch with current life rhythms. But

maybe that is the point. We have just cleared the Thanksgiving table, we already feel months behind on our shopping list, we've been planning for special pre-Christmas festivities, and now we are invited to think about Advent and the coming of the Divine. It's like the college student in his second day of classes and already feeling like he is two weeks behind. Honoring the season of Advent asks us to give time and attention we don't feel like we have; it is contrary to all that we see going on around us. So why pay attention to Advent when we can be partying with everyone else?

The four Sundays of Advent leading up to Christmas are intentional moments of getting ready, watching and waiting for the long-expected coming of Christ. Advent isn't just a season of waiting for a baby. It is a time of preparing for the return of a full-grown Child of Humanity that Matthew calls the Son of Man to judge and redeem our chaotic, violent world. Therefore, on this first Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that the work of the first Advent, that first coming of Christ is not complete. Advent is incomplete until Christ returns. At the very end of Matthew, the risen Christ instructs and empowers us to continue our witness until the second coming, the end of the age, as he calls it. Christ says "...remember I am with you always, to the end of the age." As Dr. Ron Allen explains it, Matthew presents an end-time orientation which is based on the idea that history is divided into two ages – a present, evil age that God will soon replace with a new age, often called the realm of God or the realm of heaven. The old age is marked by the presence of demons, idolatry, sin, injustice, exploitation, sickness, violence, death; it is marked by humanity and nature being at odds against each other. The new age will be characterized by the complete rule of God and the angels; by authentic worship, forgiveness, mutual support, health, eternal life, and humanity and nature equally blessing one another. For Matthew, God is acting through Christ to bring about the change from the old to the new age. The birth, life, and resurrection of Christ was the beginning of that transformation, and the completion will occur with the second coming of the Messiah. Meanwhile, the faith community and the earth live in a conflict zone between the two ages.

Those who have gotten all caught up in the “Left Behind” series by Tim LaHaye fail to understand this dynamic Matthew is teaching here. Our text today doesn’t help the situation as it appears to insinuate that one will be taken and the other left behind and we can somehow predict when that will occur. Commentary scholar Douglas Hare writes, “It is clear that not even the Messiah knows when the end will occur, not even the highest angels are privy to God’s intention. How foolish it is for humans to think they can play with biblical numbers and ambiguous prophecies and discover what was hidden even from Jesus.” How arrogant of us to think we are more knowledgeable than Jesus.

The problem we face with this in-between time, that is, in-between the birth of the baby and the return of the divine Child of Humanity, is tripping over predictions and forecasts that are flawed. There is a story told about the indigenous Cree people who asked their chief if the winter was going to be cold this year? Not really knowing how to answer, the Cree chief replied that the winter was going to be cold and that the members of the village should prepare by collecting wood. Being a good leader, he then went to call the National Weather Service to ask their opinion. “Is this winter going to be cold?” The man on the phone replied, “This winter is going to be quite cold indeed.” So, the chief went back to speed up his people to collect even more wood to be prepared. A week later, he called the National Weather Service again and asked, “Is it going to be a very cold winter?” “Yes,” the man replied, “It’s going to be a very cold winter.” Thus, the chief went back to his people and ordered them to go and find every scrap of wood they could find. Two weeks later, he called the National Weather Service again: “Are you absolutely sure this winter is going to be very cold?” “Absolutely,” the man said, “The Cree people are collecting wood like crazy!”

Speaking in familiar language to Matthew’s audience, the Gospel author won’t provide detailed time-line scenarios nor exact specifics but instead teaches us how to remain steadfast in living out our faith, even in the midst of conflict, until the new age arrives. Focusing on the “when” distracts us from the “how.” Pondering whether one will be taken or left behind downplays the significance of “how” we are practicing

watchfulness as Christ teaches. In other words, if the homeowner knew when the thief was coming, that person would have stayed awake and prevented the break-in. From Matthew's perspective, if people do not know when the new age will occur, they cannot wait until the time is near to start preparing for it. Therefore, the key question is not "when" but "how" we will be found, "how" will our demeanor reflect Christ's teachings, what will we be doing as the new age approaches? Perhaps one way to practice watchfulness and be ready in this Advent season is to leave behind the "Left Behind," with all its flawed misconceptions, and focus more on our own efforts to support and bring about God's realm in our own time and space.

The season of Advent helps us pay attention to what has yet to come in our world and to participate with God in bringing about the new age God envisions for creation. We need to watch and stay alert, knowing neither the day nor the hour, but we also have a responsibility to teach and witness as Jesus did regarding the qualities God uses to lure people toward God's realm. How will you love and receive love in the relationships of your life? How will your interactions become sacred moments, especially with those least like you? How will you practice human kindness and communal efforts on behalf of society's helpless and hopeless? Pay attention to God and what God is doing in this season. Let Jesus' words sink deep, "Lo I am with you always, until the end of the age." We probably aren't going to find a snow globe scene of the Son of Humanity coming with power and great glory, so it is up to us to depict that good news in our daily lives. We can become that scene for real, through our selfless and loving acts, with music streaming from our hearts as we wait for the dear Christ to enter in. It is up to you and I to be ready to welcome the One in whom the hopes and fears of all the years are met. Let's turn up the volume and sing with joyful anticipation, "O come to us, abide with us, our God Emmanuel!"