

**FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YEAR A, RCL**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24: 36-44; Psalm 122**  
**The Rev. Danáe Ashley**  
**November 27, 2016**

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming...Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

When I was in college, I went to Whitworth University in Spokane, a private Presbyterian liberal arts college, most of my friends would have white boards on the outside of their dorm rooms to leave messages if they weren't in. Usually they put things like “Amy's room” at the top or told where they were “Mike is at the library,” but occasionally, people got rather witty and some of them would write, “The rapture came...guess you didn't make it. Leave a message.” I always thought that was rather amusing and it also makes me think about Matthew's Gospel that we hear today.

Jesus tells the disciples that, as they are living out their daily life, he will come again. Just like the flood came out of the blue during Noah's time—people were eating, drinking, getting married, working on projects, dreaming about the future—and then they are all swept away. So too, will Jesus come at an unexpected hour. But, if we are listening with ears that hear and hearts that see, then we know the urgency that keeps us going in our Christian life. We must always keep awake. We must always be ready, doing the work that we are called to do in our daily lives. We can't get slack.

We are in the season of Advent. This is a time for us to prepare the way for the Lord to come to us. This is the time when we remember the story of Jesus' birth and the joy that ushers in to our lives and the life of the world to come. How do we prepare for Jesus to be present in our lives? Matthew seems to answer that quite clearly: we must keep awake; we must be ready. There's a quippy bumper sticker that says, “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” But clearly, from our texts today, it isn't enough to *look* busy—Jesus knows our hearts, knows our actions, and in that knowledge, knows who is truly awake and ready, who has put on the armor of light—who has prepared the way for him to come.

The word ‘Advent’ is derived from the Latin word *adventus* meaning ‘coming’. This first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Christian year. The background of Advent is the kingdom of God, the rule of God over creation, which is said to be “at hand.” One prepares for judgment in the presence of the great king, and when Advent is over, one confronts the child in the manger. It is telling that we begin our year this way—reflecting on the magnitude of God and the paradox of that awesomeness being put into an infant child. What does this tell us? To expect the unexpected when it comes to God, certainly. But also to follow the example of this unexpected God. To live within a culture and be known and recognized as a Christian. Preparing for Jesus to be among us is one of many marks of this way of life.

Of course, there are many ways for us to prepare for Jesus. Even within the small space of the four weeks of Advent, there are things we can do. For example, we've included a number of online resources for Advent calendars in our Messenger newsletter, there are paper Advent calendars in the Narthex, and we are having an Advent Festival next Sunday! From a different perspective, according to the National Retail Federation, did you know that the expected retail sales in November and December (excluding autos, gas and restaurants) are to increase a solid 3.6 percent to \$655.8 billion. Online sales are forecast to increase between 7 and 10 percent over last year to as much as \$117 billion (from <https://nrf.com/resources/consumer-data/holiday-headquarters>)? This means, based on the US

population from the 2010 census, that we are spending \$2124 for every woman, man, and child in the United States. Of course, we know that some people spend far less than that and some people spent far more, but still. \$655.8 *billion* dollars on retail sales for Christmas alone? Amazing huh? This type of recreational spending is happening when it would cost 10 billion to give Africa's worst drought and contaminated water areas a clean water program. Or when money could be donated to NightWatch or Solid Ground or the Elizabeth Gregory House or to our church for the ministries that strive to improve lives here in Seattle or in our neighborhood. While it is, of course, a delight to give loved ones a special gift during the season, there is a different perspective when we also think that how our dollars are spent could influence whether a person lives or dies, feels comforted or isolated, knows the warmth of the love of God or the darkness when that warmth is not shared.

Jesus' warning of the Son of Man coming at an unexpected hour gives urgency to the question: Who is our neighbor? It is a child in Africa and a close friend in need. It is one of the Jewish or Muslim people that are part of faith communities near us and our neighbors are also students at UW. It is the person down the street with the terminal diagnosis and it is the person next door to them with the brand new baby. Trials and tribulations occur unexpectedly to everyone. It is how we respond to them that reveals us to be followers of Jesus. After all, we are also someone else's neighbor. Other people are watching us to see and understand what it means to be a Christian. The work we do in response to following Jesus is important in new ways that we may not have imagined even a year ago.

Think about it this way—everyone, hold your right hand in front of you in a fist. Everything you know about Jesus, all the blessings you have been given, are in this fist. Nothing can leave your fist, but also nothing can come in. There's no room at this inn. Now, open your hand and hold the palm up—here, not only can you give something, but you can receive so much more. The more you give, the more you can receive. That is how Jesus is calling our spirits to be—vessels of this abundant grace, love, and compassion that we have been shown by God. Perhaps this is the unexpected hour that Jesus is coming? There is much work to be done and many of us have lost the urgency that the early Christian communities shared. It is in our laxity that the insidiousness of apathy occurs and we end up scrambling to light our lamps and push back the darkness. As Christians, this means that every hour is the unexpected hour until the world is reconciled to God.

It sounds like I'm talking about the *Lord of the Rings* epic or a Marvel comics story, I know, but we are in real life. This real, Christian life requires things of us that the Gospel of Matthew reminds us of. "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know what day your Lord is coming." Keep awake...even if you the barista gets your coffee order wrong. Keep awake...even when you are uncertain if someone else called 911 when you witness a hateful act and it may help to have your voice on the line. Keep awake...when there's an opportunity to be a blessing to someone unexpectedly. Keep awake...when you're organizing your calendar and realize it's too full to have time to think or be with yourself, God, and your community. Keep awake...when you hear that still small voice that you know is God asking you to do something really hard and you don't think you can do it and God knows you can.

Keep awake...awake and ready to receive the work we are each called to do to show this wonderful, hurting, extraordinary world what it means to be a Christian. AMEN.