

Sermon: Matthew 24:36-44 (Advent 1A)
Christ Church Riverdale, 28 November 2010
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Matthew 24:36-44 (NRSV) 'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as 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. 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. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

"Be ready," Jesus said, "For the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." During the season of Advent we prepare for Christ's coming, not just as a baby in a humble stable in Bethlehem, but for his second coming in glorious majesty. Over the centuries a number of people have tried to predict the date of this second coming, always with the same result--they didn't see it happen! Sometimes they'd change the date and *still* not see it happen, reminding us of this Gospel where Jesus says, "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." "Be ready," Jesus said, "For the Son of Man is coming at an *unexpected* hour."

Are any of you still kind of sleepy from Thanksgiving? Maybe it was the huge meal, or the tryptophan in the turkey, or having houseguests, or getting up early to fight the crowds. Holidays are tiring, and can put us into a kind of sleepwalking mode to get through them. Jesus, though, reminds us not to sleepwalk through life but to be alert and be ready for his coming. As the days get shorter and colder this time of year it's physically tempting to want to curl up and hibernate, but spiritually our call is to remain alert and be aware of the big picture--the big story.

Too often the big story in our society is that the important things are to be richer, thinner and younger, that we should never be satisfied with what we have, because there's always the supersize, or the deluxe, or a faster processor, or a more powerful engine, or cooler "apps." Shakespeare's Macbeth said, "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." One scholar I read said by contrast, "For the Bible and for the church, life is a tale told by a strong and sovereign God, enacted according to God's pleasure. It is full of both judgment and grace, and it moves toward the time when God will make all things new."¹ Even though it's not as memorable as Shakespeare, that's where I'm putting my money!

So how do we live in light of life being a tale told by God? One way is to stay aware of the big story of God's love even when the details of our specific stories weigh us down, tire us out, even make us furious. Why is the big story so important? It can make all the difference! When a blade cuts human flesh it can mean a stabbing attack using a knife, or it can mean life-

¹ David L. Bartlett, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1 (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010), 22.

saving surgery with a scalpel. Knowing the big picture lets us tell the difference between two radically different things: Is it assault or surgery? Staying aware of God's big story helps us understand the meaning of our specific stories and how to navigate the difficult waters we sail.

Jesus said, "If the owner of the house had known [when] the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into." We might say, "If I had known when that heart attack was coming, I would have gone ahead with that exercise program." We can't predict the unpredictable, but we *can* prepare for it; we can focus on being ready. Think back not that long ago to before the days of cellphones and texting and remember what it was like to expect guests for Thanksgiving. They weren't able to let you know what train station they had reached, or what bridge had heavy traffic holding them up, or that they've gotten to the Dyckman Subway stop ... that they've gotten to 207th . . . then to 215th, etc.!

I remember as a kid watching our driveway out my bedroom window for my grandparents to drive up. It felt like they'd never get there! I waited for what seemed like an eternity, but what must've been at least 20 or 30 minutes, and not just because I especially loved my grandmother's pumpkin pie! We couldn't predict exactly when my grandparents would arrive, so we had to be ready at the earliest time it might happen.

Be ready, for Christ is coming at an unexpected hour. We can't predict the unpredictable but we can prepare; we can do our best to be ready. Ready for our part in the big story at the earliest time it might happen next, which is now . . . now . . . now. Yes, today's gospel refers to a coming of Christ at the end of the age, but I believe Christ is constantly seeking to come among us--that the unexpected hour isn't simply a point in the future but an opportunity we are presented with daily. Living life ready for the coming of Christ means treasuring each day, savoring each moment for the gift of God it is, living with no regrets and with the latchstring out for Jesus to come in any time.

Take a moment please and look around in the church for brass. (Point out candle holders, eagle lectern, etc.) What we see depends a lot on what we're looking for, and now that I've drawn your attention to brass, I bet you'll notice it a lot more than you would have otherwise. Christ comes at an unexpected hour--in unexpected circumstances. When we live as the Baptismal Covenant says, seeking and serving Christ in all persons and loving our neighbors as ourselves, we're able to live in a way that expects the extraordinary in ordinary circumstances.

When a group of people is working and they're kind of dragging, sometimes the boss will say, "Look alive!" And people perk up and actually work better, at least for a while--they *are* more alive when they decide to look that way. So we can decide to look alive and appreciate the life God breathes into us every moment. Christ is coming at an unexpected time, in unexpected circumstances. In this way God gives us hope as we live in this time of declining light by kindling in our hearts and growing in our lives the true Light of the World.

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