

## “Between the Already and Not Yet”

A sermon based on Matthew 24:36-44  
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
on Sunday, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019  
by David Oliver-Holder

Hope. Anticipation. Expectation. These are the dispositions of Advent. And I had the pleasure of seeing these fully embodied on Thanksgiving Day as we cooked and baked all day. Our dog, Luna, was ever in the kitchen, watching us as we worked on the countertops, just waiting, hoping, anticipating every little morsel that might happen to fall to the kitchen floor.

That’s the call for us today, this first Sunday of Advent. Gone are the long, darkening days of ordinary time, during which we pass from the beautiful green of summer through the colors of Autumn, to the leafless brown of November. Advent comes just when we need it, and we are called to embrace it with great enthusiasm.

Some become so impatient for this season, that they begin its observance way before today. In fact, our secular culture begins its embrace of what this beautiful season well before Thanksgiving, so that by the time Christmas Day arrives, most folks are too exhausted and too indebted to appreciate the reason for the season.

Our secular culture knows we are on to something. And while the larger culture so often misunderstands what we are about in this liturgical new year, they do sense the energy and the enthusiasm we feel.

Advent, for us, is when the grand cycle of the liturgical year begins anew. And it begins with us remembering how God breaks into the world, answering the prayers of many, who are desperate for change. God comes and breaks through everything that would clutter our relationship with God, and announces that the kingdom is among us. It is near.

The wind of the Spirit blows and pushes us out of our comfort zones, ruffles the feathers of our preconceptions and half-truths, and invites us to open ourselves to the One who is the Truth. When we so often settle for what is merely

religious, God comes and challenges us to embrace what is holy, and alive. When we encounter God in this way, it is hard to avoid change.

Advent is the time, then, to work on putting ourselves in tune with God. We are made for music, and when God comes, God comes like a song. Certainly Kurt Vonnegut was right to ask that his epitaph read: "THE ONLY PROOF HE NEEDED FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD WAS MUSIC."<sup>i</sup>

Some of us are easy to get back into tune, like a stringed instrument. Others of us are like pianos or organs that require a good bit more skill and work to recover a good tuning. Advent is the time when, through scripture and prayer, meditation and waiting, we allow the spirit of God to put us in tune.

Rather than these four weeks before Christmas being merely a time to get warmed-up for Christmas, these days can be a time of refocusing, of harmonization. It can be a time when we prepare our ears and our hearts and minds to perceive the active presence of the Maestro, and ready ourselves to make the sweet music of Immanuel.

## II

What Jesus offers us in the Gospel lesson today is encouragement to remain faithful in hard and disorienting times. He reminds us, here most forcefully, to be ready. For when the time of his return comes, it will come with shattering suddenness on the unprepared, those who are so immersed in themselves, their work, or their possessions, that they are caught unawares.

The image Jesus presents is a good one, one with a twist. It is one of someone's house being broken into or burgled. Literally, the expression Jesus uses is "dug through." The thief chose to dig through the wall to get into the house.

The thief doesn't sound like the brightest of thieves, does he? That is what gives the admonition its twist. Pay attention, Jesus says. You probably deserve to have your property stolen if you can't notice someone digging through a wall in your house.

So pay attention. Live as if Christ is already among us, which, in fact, is the truth. Jesus has already come among us once. And he said, "Behold, I will be

with you always.” He is with us in his body, the Church. Here we find Christ among us.

So already, the kingdom is on its way to being established. That is the already we celebrate. But what God began in Jesus is not yet complete. That is the not yet that we anticipate. We are between the already and the not yet.

To live well in this meantime, Jesus tells us not to busy ourselves mining the Bible for clues about the day when Jesus will return. All of those Bible-prophecy programs you find on Cable, with their self-appointed experts talking about prophecy and the end times are perfectly useless. Such programs, and books, and lecture series, serve only to satisfy our idle curiosities. Jesus himself said that even he did not know the hour nor the day when God would bring all things to an end.

To live well and enjoy the abundant life, we must watch. We are called to live as Jesus taught us to live, seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. None of us can predict when Jesus will come again. The way to be prepared at all times is by doing the things and living the kind of lives that we know will be pleasing to Christ when he does return.

### III

But what happens to us? Like the wheel that slips into the rut in the road, we slip into our habits of speaking and acting. We spend so much of our time running on auto-pilot. We are, in this way, not unlike the people who once greeted President Franklin Roosevelt at a gala ball. He was tired of shaking hands and smiling his big smile and mouthing all of the usual words at such an occasion.

So, he decided to do something outrageous. Convinced that no one was listening anyway, the President greeted each person by saying, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.”

Just as he anticipated, everyone responded with a smile And a nod and said things like, “Wonderful!” “Lovely!” “Keep up the good work, Mr. President.”

One diplomat, however, was listening and actually heard what the President had said. He leaned over and whispered in Roosevelt's ear, "I'm sure she had it coming to her!"

How thankful Roosevelt must have been that at least one person was listening, and that the person responded with such a sharp wit. And how pleased Christ must be when we listen, when we are ready, and when we respond artfully.

Jesus really leaves little room for disciples to run on auto-pilot. We are called to actively, consciously follow a pattern, a vision. It is a vision beautifully conveyed by Isaiah. It is a vision of the place of God being exalted, and the tools of death and destruction being destroyed. The appropriate response to this vision is to live guided by it, to creatively find ways to make it real.

The marvelous thing is that vision is stated as a certainty. History will reach its goal. What we are to be about in the meantime, between the already and the not yet, is continuing the progress made by all of the saints who have gone before us.

The reign of Christ will come. The question, then, is not if it will come, but whether we will be ready when it does come, whether we will be paying attention to see the signs of God's Spirit at work in the world. In the meantime, we must contend with much that is not yet.

Our world continues to be wracked with violence and war. And the news can sometimes overwhelm us. Too often, the standard response is **escape**, through frenzied consumption, or various substances. Ours is a culture in the serious pursuit of numbness and blindness.

That is one reason Madison Avenue's Holiday Season is so lucrative. With the world as it is, even a little purchased distraction is worth the trouble and expense. But with that bargain, we risk losing what it is that we really seek.

What we really want, what we long for deep in our hearts, is an encounter with Christ, with the one who is our light and our life.

Let us, then, heed the words of Romans and clothe ourselves with Christ,

surrounding ourselves with him. Let us develop a Christian sense of time. Let us be prepared, both for the Second Coming of our Lord, and for the gracious, brief epiphanies of God's reign that God grants us when we need them most.

Let us clear away distractions and watch with expectation, not because we know when to expect the return of Christ, but because we know what his coming means. It means life, everlasting life. It means we will know as we are known. It means our joy will be complete.

Such things, surely, are worth the wait. Even so, Come, Lord Jesus.  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*,