

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 27, 2016
Advent 1
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 24:37-44

As we start the cycle of the liturgical year over again, I am reminded of how quickly it seems time passes. I was thinking this week that it was *fifteen* years ago when the crisis we know as “9/11” occurred. I remember that subsequent to that event, there was a sharp increase in church attendance and a dramatic rise in attention to spiritual things. Peoples' awareness was heightened at almost every level, but this was particularly true in spiritual matters.

That crisis in our nation also led to a revival of rampant speculation about the *time* of Christ's return. Even though Jesus and the New Testament writers warn repeatedly that the time of Christ's return is unknowable, there's nothing like a good crisis on the national or world stage to send people running for their charts and timelines. I guess it's just human nature to want to know.

But interestingly enough, in today's Gospel Matthew takes the conversation of Jesus' return in a different direction. Rather than linking Jesus' return to some sort of *crisis*, Matthew does the opposite. Matthew gives us no hint whatsoever that Christ's return will be fraught with natural disaster, personal trauma, or mysterious signs of the impending judgment.

Instead, what does he do? He talks to us about Noah, and the state of life just prior to the Flood. He talks to us about ordinary folks engaged in the everyday, ordinary things of life. He talks to us about folks eating, drinking, marrying, and enjoying life without worry. He speaks about the *unexpected* occurrence of an event to an *unprepared* people. The event was not linked to any crisis. It came in the midst of "business as usual."

Matthew also talks to us about a thief, who strikes without warning and without hindrance. Again, there is no crisis precipitating or warning of the thief's coming. Nothing to "tip off" or alert the homeowner, otherwise the homeowner would take action.

It can be easy for us to forget that Matthew writes these words not primarily to those who are "out there," but to a faith community, a *church*. He writes for a people who were living "in between" two very important events -- between the *resurrection* of Jesus and the *return* of Jesus.

And the more time that passed as they awaited Jesus' return, the more the people in the church were tempted to become apathetic -- to lose sight of who they were as God's children and to get bogged down in the ordinary, everyday affairs of life. To slip into the rut of "business as usual."

Matthew writes to remind God's people that when life becomes "business as usual," then we can be *unprepared* for God's unexpected activity in our lives.

When life becomes "business as usual," we can forget our status as children of God and become consumers of goods. We find ourselves -- like the folks in Noah's day-- in a state of ignorant bliss. Life is reduced to busily shopping at Trader Joe's, checking your Facebook status, or dozing off at a stoplight.

For Matthew, **of all the things we in the church can ill afford, complacency tops the list.** For God's decisive intervention in our world will not come tied to some 9/11 type of crisis; God's decisive intervention will come when we least expect it. It will arrive in the midst of everyday life.

As this Advent season begins, it is our task to remind one another of this truth. We are called to challenge ourselves and one another that our preparation for Christ's return must be *a way of life*, not just something we think about in times of crisis.

In a sense, our preparation for Christ's return is similar to a young married couple who discover they are expecting their first child. From the moment they learn the news, these parents-to-be begin preparing for the baby's arrival and the changes it will bring.

They do not wait until the baby is born to buy baby furniture, baby clothes, toys, or other accessories. They do not wait until the baby's birth to prepare and make ready the nursery. Most expectant mothers begin to make changes in their diet, restricting alcohol and caffeine, avoiding smoking, and getting plenty of rest.

Expectant parents don't wait nine months to make these changes. They prepare for their child's arrival, *and they start living as though the child has already come.*

We are embarking again on the time of year where we are going to feel enormous pressure to consume and to be consumers. My task as your pastor is to make this a time of year *where you have opportunities to ponder what it means to welcome Christ into your midst, both in familiar and unfamiliar ways.*

Together, our task is to remind one another that our ministry here at Epworth is not just "business as usual." As a church, we struggle together against complacency. We struggle together to remain steadfast in our calling, doing our best to share the love of God in the day-to-day affairs of life, because that is where Jesus unexpectedly comes to us.

As you come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you to do something a little unusual. As you get up from your seats to make your way to the communion rail, I invite you to give your arms and legs a little shake. Shake off any lingering apathy that has found its way into your heart during the last several months. Shake off the "business as usual" attitude that has subtly infiltrated your heart and mind. Receive the grace he offers to you in the bread and wine. Then join your brothers and sisters in awaiting his coming.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.