

First Sunday in Advent  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
11/27/2022

Matthew 24:36-44

“Four weeks before Christmas, Reverend Johnson of Christ Episcopal was leading a children’s service featuring an Advent wreath. He had told the children what the three purple candles represented, then he asked, “Does anyone know what the pink one means?” No one answered. Finally little Sara’s hand went up, “Are Mary and Joseph expecting a girl?” (World’s greatest collection of Church Jokes.) This silly joke does have a valuable question. What do these candles represent? The answer is simple: The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent, and one candle is lit each Sunday. Three of the candles are purple because the color violet is a liturgical color that signifies a time of prayer, penance, and sacrifice. The first candle, which is purple, symbolizes hope. It is sometimes called the “Prophecy Candle” in remembrance of the prophets, especially Isaiah, who foretold the birth of Christ. It represents the expectation felt in anticipation of the coming Messiah. The second candle, also purple, represents faith. It is called the “Bethlehem Candle” as a reminder of Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem. The third candle is pink and symbolizes joy. It is called the “Shepard’s Candle,” and it is pink because rose is a liturgical color for joy. The third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday and is meant to remind us of the joy that the world experienced at the birth of Jesus, as well as the joy that the faithful have reached the midpoint of Advent. In some churches, the rose candle commemorates Mary and the joy she experienced as she was awaiting the birth of her son. The white candle is placed in the middle of the wreath and lit on Christmas Eve. This candle is called the “Christ Candle” and represents the life of Christ. The color white is for purity—because Christ is our sinless, pure Savior. (mercyhome.org).

Today, as we begin the Advent season, we read from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 23. It is kind of strange that we begin a year-long reading of this Evangelist almost at the end of his book. It is almost as though the lectionary writers want us to have the end in mind before we start the story. In a way, we need to know the destination before we chart our course. Chapter 23 demands that we be ready. Let us place this portion of Matthew within its context. This unit is part of a larger section known as the fifth sermon of Matthew. This fifth sermon began on verse 1 of Chapter 23 and will end on verse 46 of Chapter 25. Experts believe that Matthew wrote five extensive sermons which he placed within the narrative of the Gospel of Mark at 5 various points. The theme of this last sermon is judgement. This sermon begins with warnings against the hypocritical behaviors of the leaders of the day who present the outward signs of religiosity, but whose hearts are very distant from the Lord. Jesus tells his disciples that the Pharisees and Scribes, “Do not practice what they preach. They tie up burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to carry them.” (23:4).

The sermon then moves to talk about the future destruction of the Temple and the signs of the end of times. “For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.” Many will come saying that they are the Messiah, “false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” On that day “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.” This will be in fact a most terrible day of judgement for those who have not accepted Jesus.

The thought on the disciples minds is very clear, “When?” When will all of this happen? And this is where our reading today provides an answer. Jesus presents the last day as a day of catastrophe and judgement, but quickly states that only God knows when this day will come. He presents two illustrations to make this point. One is the example of the “Lost Generation” during the time of Noah. Those who perished in the flood were busy with their normal everyday lives, consumed with the responsibilities that every day brought. They were “eating and drinking,” an image that speaks of taking care of physical needs. They were “marrying and giving into marriage,” an image that speaks of emotional needs. But they “knew nothing, until the flood came and swept them all away.” As concerned as they were with the physical and emotional needs of everyday life, they knew nothing, in the sense that they didn’t know the Lord. They had no wisdom because they did not fear, love and obey the Lord. Their lives were consumed with the ordinariness of everyday and they failed to see God among them, to love him, and to obey him. In this sense they were a wicked generation. Jesus concludes, “it will be the same for this generation when the Son of Man comes.”

Then Jesus gives them another example to make this point. If the owner of the house knew when a thief was to break in, he would do all in his power to protect his property. But thieves don’t make appointments. They don’t fit your house in between prior commitments and call first to check with you about their plans. They simply wait for the right time and then break in when you least expect it. Then Jesus says, it will be the same when he comes. The Son of Man will come as a thief in the night. The lesson of both of these examples that Jesus gives them today is that since the disciples and since we ourselves don’t know the day or the hour for our Lord’s return, we must be always ready.

We must approach each day with the same care some take in preparing for Black Friday shopping. We must be alert, awake, focused, and determined. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the season of preparation for our Lord’s birth. As we prepare to celebrate another birthday of Jesus on Christmas day, we must also prepare for that other coming at the end of days. We must be alert and ready. The next few weeks will be a time of anxiety for some, and a time of depression and crushing loneliness for others. This will be a time when the ordinariness of everyday life will become very important for us. We will worry about buying stuff, preparing the right meal, inviting the right people to our parties, preparing our house the best way we can for the visitors that will come out to see us, etc. But we cannot let this ordinariness of life distract us from our primary task

this season of Advent. This primary task is to prepare our hearts and the hearts of our families to receive Christ anew this coming Christmas. The season invites us to see the Lord among us and to offer him the honor, worship, and love he deserves.

Our main task then is to prepare a place for Jesus at the inn of our hearts. We do this by practicing the behaviors the season introduces: prayer, penance, sacrifice, and joy. Prayer for ourselves, our families, and our world acknowledges that the boy about to come is good news for us. He is the very answer to what afflicts the world. Penance requires honesty to admit our faults and humility to ask God to forgive us. Penance can come in the form of fasting, the sacrament of confession, journaling about the joys and challenges of being a Christian, assessment of things that need to be changed in your life, etc. Sacrifice means service. Nothing gets us better into the Christmas spirit than helping others. This may be a season when you choose to volunteer at the Hope Center Houston, Lord of the Streets, or Nam. Service can also be less “official” and more spontaneous: Invite your neighbors to supper, write cards to shut ins, visit or call friends who are lonely or sick, etc. There are hundreds of little things you can do to lead a life of service. Finally, don’t forget to experience the joy of the season as you prepare for family in a spirit of prayerful devotion. There is joy all around you. Open your heart and mind to see it, hear it, and experience it.

May this time of anticipation make us all more aware of the needs of others. May this time of preparation make us more aware of our need for Christ in our lives. May this time of looking forward fill our hearts with joyful expectation as we await the coming of our King, Redeemer, and Friend. Amen!