

December 1, 2019 First Sunday of Advent Matthew 24:36-44

“Be Ready, Awake and Prepared”

Two elements that together constitute the dominant dynamic of this passage stood out. The first is that, whatever else is going on, the central thrust of the passage is promise. That’s easy to miss, given the somewhat dire warnings about the future coming of the Son. Yet Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and at the heart of this brief section is his promise that when he comes, he “will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”. Everything else that is said must be heard in light of this promise.

The second issue at hand is the sheer unexpectedness of the events Jesus talks about. No one knows, when he says in today’s passage – neither angels nor even he himself – no one knows when this will take place except the Father. And it’s this element of the uncertainty, even unpredictable element of life that offers a point of entry, I think, into this otherwise odd passage.

Because here's the thing: it's not just the consummation of time and history that is unexpected. Much of life is like that. We are regularly caught off guard – sometimes joyfully, but often not. The devastation of all the natural disasters represent the precarious and unpredictable nature of our life in this world on a grand scale. But a miscarriage, a lost job, a heart attack, death of a loved one, or so many other personal, heartbreaking, and unanticipated setbacks can take us all aback and threaten any resemblance of order we'd imaged we'd created for ourselves.

And we know this. In fact, we regularly try to protect ourselves against such personal disasters. Not only via the beneficial instruments of life and medical insurance, but also by a host of other ways: perhaps by not taking a risk on a dream for fear of failure, or by shielding ourselves from possible disappointments in life or relationships, or by numbing ourselves to the pain of others lest it haunt us with the possibility of our own loss. We know life is

precarious, unpredictable, and for these reasons also precious, but we often deny or are afraid to speak of that fact.

So what if this week, I invite you to take stock of your life, asking what it is that you most fear about an uncertain future, and then remind yourself of the promise that whether or not your immediate fears are realized, we were created for more than fear because Jesus, the Son of Man and Son of God whose coming birth we anticipate, has promised to come always to be both with us and for us.

This promise does not insulate us from an uncertain future, but it does promise that we will not face that future alone. Come hell or high water – Jesus will be at our side, granting us courage in the face of life’s adversities and remaining with us even through death, drawing us into new life.

If we believe this is true, then what might we dare? What might we venture or risk, knowing that all loss and disappointment, as difficult as they may be, are also occasions to experience more

deeply the healing presence of the one who came, the one who comes, and will come again, always for us and all the world?

If we aren't watchful, if we aren't paying attention, we will be taken by surprise when something bad happens.

This doesn't mean we can anticipate every difficult event—accident, illness, loss, financial or political upheaval. However, being watchful means being ready, awake, prepared.

Paying attention is one of the main Advent themes.

Pay attention to the people closest to you. How will you give and receive love in those relationships?

Pay attention to the people you encounter. How might your interactions aim toward being holy moments?

Pay attention to the people least like you. This may be more difficult, but how will you learn from them?

Pay attention to God and to what God is doing in the world. How can you awaken your senses to notice goodness and peace?

Pay attention to yourself. Self-awareness is highly underrated. How will you be awake to your body, soul, spirit, and values during Advent? How will that self-awareness translate into how you spend your time?

We never know what's going to happen next, but faithful watching can help us be prepared for both the good and the bad, the delightful and the challenging.

As the days grow shorter and the darkness grows, we light Advent candles each week to remind us that we do not face the darkness alone but that, indeed, the light of the world has come, shining on in the darkness to illumine our lives and lead us forth not in fear but courage ... and even joy.

In light of this promise, perhaps one of my favorite prayers might help anchor us in Jesus' promise of presence and blessing, the one thing that is sure and certain amid all the uncertainties of this life: Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils

unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pay attention. And be ready.

It is just that simple, it is just that hard.

Thanks be to God. Amen.