

Well first of all, Happy New Year. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which begins the new church year. We are entering year A of our Sunday Lectionary, so we will be reading primarily from Matthew this year. I love that our church follows a church year, a cycle. It's a way to remind us that as we go through life in a largely secular world, we carry our faith with us. As the world prepares for Santa Claus, we prepare for the incarnation of Jesus Christ. As the tulips bloom in the spring, we remember our salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. When the schoolchildren look for the beginning of summer break, we acknowledge our mission of service in feast of Pentecost. And as everyone enjoys the long summer months, we remember and study the worldly ministry of Jesus during the Pentecost regular time. This is not to say that we live separate lives from others. Just the opposite. It is to remind us that as we live in our regular worldly lives, we carry with us a special commission, a commission of Love. That love should color and inform our lives in everything we do. We dovetail our life in Christ with our life in the world.

For me, the Gospel reading today speaks to this. In chapter 24 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus and the disciples have just left the temple and are on the Mount of Olives. Jesus has predicted the destruction of the Temple. Now his disciples ask him three questions in one sentence, "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Then Jesus gives them a long litany of physical signs of the coming destruction of the Temple. And, of course, the Temple is destroyed by the Romans about 30 years later. He also predicts their own persecution for proclaiming his gospel to the world, and we know that persecution took place.

Then, in today's reading, Jesus addresses the second coming and the end time. "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." That seems pretty simple and straightforward. But it hasn't stopped Christian leaders over the centuries from predicting

the end of the world. I was looking into these predictions, and stopped counting at 175. Martin of Tours predicted no later than the year 400, Pope Innocent III predicted 1284, Martin Luther felt that 1600 would be the year. The Christian radio evangelist Herbert W. Armstrong predicted 1936, then 1943, 1972 and then finally 1975. There are many, many more than that. If you want something current, Jeane Dixon predicted Armageddon in 2020, so we have that to look forward to. The question is why do we keep doing this when Jesus told us that no one knows when the time is coming?

We are Human Beings, and humans are curious. It is one of the prime reasons we have been so successful as a species. We want to know when, why, where, and how. We want to prepare. Whether our understanding of the end time is a huge battle of Armageddon, a glorious but peaceful return of Christ, or an individual return to our Father after our own death; we want to be prepared. We want our bags to be packed. I am guilty of this myself, I've been planning and revising my own funeral service for about 20 years. Ask my kids, it drives them a little nuts. But Jesus tells us today that it is useless to try and predict. He gives us the examples of people living their lives: eating and drinking, marrying, working in the fields and in their homes, taken unawares by the end. In following verses and chapter 25, Jesus tells us more parables of preparedness and unpreparedness: Faithful and unfaithful servants, Ten Virgins, The Bags of Gold, The Sheep and the Goats. In our reading today he tells us the parable of the thief in the night. If we knew what night the thief was coming, that's the only night we would lock the doors. But we don't know, so we keep the doors locked every night.

So, what do we do with this? How do we stay prepared? Do we go into the desert and live in constant prayer, as hermits? No, we live in this world, in a state of wakefulness. Carrying Christ with us in a very conscious way, into the world. When we encounter another person, even someone who is a challenge to us that we strive to see Christ in them, that we recognize them as children of God. When we encounter systems, look for not just how that system serves us, but how it affects others. Look inward, at our own behavior, how will others see us? Will they know that we are Disciples of Christ by our actions? In John's

gospel, Jesus tells us “I’m giving you a new commandment...to love one another. Just as I have loved you, ... This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Live in empathy.

This is a new congregation for me, and I am learning the ways that you display Christ’s love. You have inspired me. I was listening to the announcement last week of the mitten tree. And I have been impressed by the pantry that works in conjunction with the Wednesday meals. There are many other examples. So, one of the things I’m doing this year is to shop for others as I shop for myself. As I start Christmas shopping, I look for mittens, hats, and scarves for the tree, and add them to my cart. When I am in the grocery store, maybe add an extra tube of toothpaste, or shampoo to the list. These are not public acts of great charity. I know it is just as easy to donate a few dollars to a charity that will buy these kinds of items, maybe at a better price. It would probably be more efficient. For me, that’s not the point. The point is to keep the needs of others in my mind, to carry them with me into the world. To remind myself of my vows. Not only my ordination vow I am to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely. When I was ordained a deacon, I received a large ordination certificate, with ornate calligraphy, a wax seal, and the bishop’s signature. But when I received it the bishop reminded us that there is a much more important certificate, the one representing our baptism. When we were baptized, or when we renew our Baptismal vows we promise that we will:

Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as yourself. We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. Living with this promise is how we live as Christians.

That is how we stay prepared.

So, I would encourage you as we begin another year in our church life together, to find ways to remind yourself each day of your life in Christ. To remind yourself that none of us know how much longer we

have, and we live each day as if there is no tomorrow. To begin each day with a renewed sense of purpose, to be part of the body of Christ in the world.