

“Prepare!”

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

What was that Gospel text we just read? Here we are, getting ready for Christmas. The church is all decked out with candles and wreaths. There's a Christmas tree up here next to me. Driving around town, you see Christmas lights up and the "Parade of Lights" was yesterday. At the end of the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade, Santa waved and shouted "Merry Christmas!" to over twenty-two million people. Yes, we're getting ready for Christmas, but we read this morning about Noah and the flood and people getting swept away and about thieves breaking into houses. What is this craziness? What does any of this have to do with Christmas?

As Delmer Chilton, a Lutheran pastor from North Carolina says, "if by Christmas you mean the winter American festival of excess and partying and gift-giving, the answer is practically nothing." You see, Advent is a time of preparation, and *that Christmas* certainly takes preparation, but of a different sort. *That Christmas* takes buying of presents, planning of parties, and traveling around to visit with various family members. Yes, it takes preparation, but the gospel lesson for today will be of no help with *that* kind of preparation.

If we are talking about the Christmas that is the celebration of God coming to be among us in human form, then the Gospel lesson *is* a guide for our preparation. We know that Advent is a time of waiting. And we don't like to wait! Waiting is difficult. Waiting through months of pregnancy and hours of labor for a baby to be born, waiting for the phone call from a loved one to let you know they arrived home safely, waiting for the biopsy results, waiting for the grade report, waiting for payday, waiting for Christmas morning. Yes, waiting is difficult. We don't like to do it. And yet, here we are, on the first Sunday of Advent, waiting for Christmas to get here. But are we just waiting like a small child for the moment when we can open the presents? *What* are we waiting for?

In a sense, we are waiting for something that has already taken place. We are preparing for that which has already come to pass. We're waiting for the birth of Jesus Christ, and we know just

how it will happen. He'll be born in a lowly stable, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and placed in a manger. Shepherds will come to see Him and later, wise men will bring their gifts. We know how it will take place. We can see it in our minds, with countless memories of children's pageants and TV shows. We know how it will take place and we know exactly when. Jesus will be born at the stroke of midnight on December 25th. We've got 24 days left for all of our preparations and waiting. We've got 24 days left to plan everything just right. Yes, we're waiting for the birth of Jesus, but it's already taken place.

And in the midst of this waiting and preparing for that which already is, our gospel reading reminds us that there is that which has *not yet* come to pass. As we prepare for the coming of Christ – and, don't get me wrong, we should definitely prepare for the celebration which remembers the birth of Christ -- but as we prepare for the first coming of Christ, we need to be also looking past it to the second coming of Christ. And that – that, we do not know how or when it will take place. I'd say it's safe to assume that it *will not* take place in a cattle stall in Bethlehem on December 25th.

Jesus tells us “no one knows” about His second coming, not the angels of Heaven, not even Jesus, and certainly not us. Not the authors of books purporting to tell us all about the second coming and who will be *left behind*. Not anyone knows when Jesus' return will take place. I've mentioned before that in one of my seminary classes, our professor, Dr. Mitzi Minor brought up supposed “signs” of the end days, such as tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Dr. Minor then asked the class “When the people in your congregations ask if these are signs of the Second Coming, what should you say to them?” Almost in unison, we said “No!” She replied in some anguish “*No*, that's not the right answer! The right answer is ‘I don't know!’” Jesus reminds us in our gospel lesson today that we do not know when He will return. And that return is supposed to be part of what we prepare for in Advent. We don't just prepare for the commemoration of the

birth of Christ. We prepare for the very real and still pending second coming of Christ, whose return will be at a time we do not know. Honestly, that makes preparing for it quite a bit harder. Jesus said we need to be ready for His return, but that's difficult and uncertain, and really, it's often more fun to celebrate His birth.

It is very natural for us to focus on commemorating that which has already taken place. On a couple's first wedding anniversary, the couple is likely to look at the pictures and watch the video of the wedding, or at least to think about the joy of their wedding day. The couple looks back and celebrates the day that was. On their first anniversary, it would be rather odd for them to spend more time thinking about their long-off twenty-fifth anniversary than looking back on the wedding day itself. It is natural for us to look back and celebrate that which has already taken place. It is joyful to celebrate the birth of Jesus in that cattle stall. And yet, we are also called to look to the future. If we spend all of our time looking backward, we have no vision for the future. And Proverbs 29:18 tells us "Where there is no vision, the people perish." As we prepare and as we wait in the season of Advent, it is a "both and." We prepare for both the commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ over 2000 years ago *and* we prepare for the second coming of Christ, whenever that may come to pass.

As we gather around the Advent wreath each week, we see more and more light come into our presence. With each candle we light, the shadows recede a bit, and the promise of Christ's second coming is just a little bit closer. With each candle, we proclaim that we believe that God's light will overcome darkness. In a well-known text that we'll get to soon, John reminds us, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." As we light candles and turn on the lights of the season, we remember that truth. Light overcomes darkness. Dr. King reminded us, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out

hate; only love can do that.” As we look at a world in which we see much hate, so much darkness, the light and love of Christ can, and will, overcome! We have hope!

Advent is a season of hope, a time when we look with confidence to the future that God has in store – though we don’t know what that future will hold. It is a time to not just commemorate that which God has already done, but to look for the new things that God will do through each of us. It is a time to get ready for the new movement of God’s spirit in our lives, to allow the light and love of Christ to shine through us. In Advent, we prepare. We prepare with the hanging of lights, the decoration of trees, the baking of cookies, the planning of get-togethers, the buying of presents, and the presence of family. But that is not all. That is not all by far. We prepare with hearts willing to listen for the spirit of God, stirring deep within us. We prepare with lives lived in constant readiness for God’s call. To be ready for the new things that God will do through us, we must beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, we must not lift swords against each other or study war, as Isaiah prophesied. We must live lives of peace – peace in our daily lives, peace in our families, peace in our places of work, peace in our church. For us to be ready for Christ to return, we must lay aside the darkness of our lives, and clothe ourselves in light. We must truly examine the lives that we have been living and then cast off that which is not pleasing to God, committing ourselves to new lives of love and service. Advent is not really about waiting. It is a time of preparation. Waiting is passive, preparation is active.

We do not know when Christ will return. We cannot plan it. We cannot pin down all the details. And so, Jesus tells us, we must always be ready. We must be ready to celebrate what God has done in the past, what God is doing right now, and what God will be doing in the future. So, let’s get ready. Let’s always be watchful – not just for that which has already come to pass and not just for that which is to come, but for what God is already doing in our midst, in and through us!

Thanks be to God! Amen