

The First Sunday of Advent A 2025
November 30, 2025
Matthew 24:36-44
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

Some stories bear repeating, so, if you've heard this one before, bear with me!... A number of years ago, I went to Good Samaritan Hospital in Portland to visit a member of the congregation where I was serving at the time. I'd parked my car and was walking across the parking lot, when a bumper sticker stopped me in my tracks: "Jesus is coming. Look busy!," it proclaimed.... At first, I was kind of annoyed. "No, no, no!," I thought to myself. "That's not the point!... 'Looking busy' certainly isn't going to fool God!..." But as I continued walking toward the hospital, a grin slowly started to spread across my face, as I pictured flocks of people running around like proverbial headless chickens, trying to make up for lost time by "proving" how very "Christian" they are! And it dawned on me that maybe the bumper sticker's statement is intentionally tongue-in-cheek. Duh!... I mean, perhaps the whole point is to provoke Christians like me – and perhaps you, too -- into taking a closer look at how we're living out our faith here and now: Are you and I content to be "couch-potato Christians," confessing Christ with our lips, even as we comfortably coast along with cultural norms that conflict with the compassionate way of Christ and inflict great harm on our neighbors? Or are we actively following Jesus Christ, who calls us to get up off our...pews, get out of our comfort zones, and get into a way of life that will inevitably bring us into conflict with popular culture and worldly powers, as we follow Christ in caring for the "least of these" who are his siblings?" Friends, these are questions each of us must ponder in our own hearts. And since Advent is the season of preparation for Christ's coming among us, there's no better time than the present to ponder all these things!

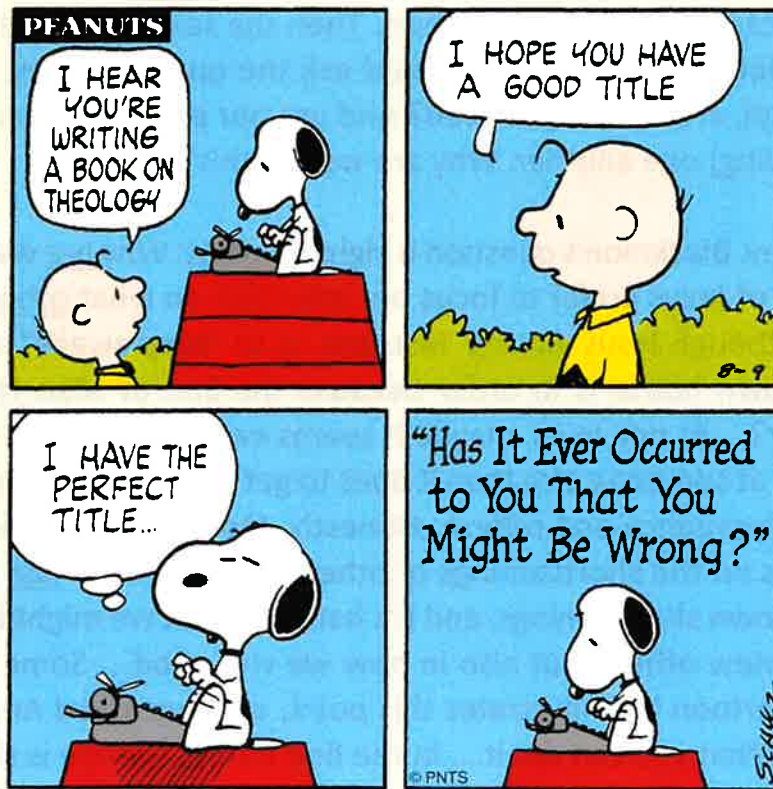
So, how do you and I prepare for our Savior's coming among us?... Even as the question crosses my lips, I'm aware that there are as many answers as there are followers of Jesus! To bring the idea home, I invite you to look around the room or look at the names on your Zoom screen, and think about this: Our loving God has created every human being to be a unique reflection of the divine image and likeness, so, it stands to reason that each of us gathered here for worship today will have a somewhat different way of prayerfully answering the question, "How am I to live my life in preparation for Christ's advent?..." As I look around at all of you, and as I think about your many gifts and ways of serving, I feel a surge of gratitude and –since I'm your pastor -- maybe just a smidge of pride! (Don't let it go to your heads!...) But I'm also curious about your response to how you see others using their God-given gifts, and I can't help wondering: Are you someone who tends to

welcome a wide diversity of gifts and a variety of different ways of serving our neighbors as being integral to God's mission of loving and blessing the world? Or are you someone who tends to take a narrower view, believing that others should lend their gifts in support of particular forms of service – perhaps those things you yourself are passionate about?

Friends, I ask these hard questions knowing that they're awkward and uncomfortable because they compel us not only to have challenging conversations with others, but also to take a long, hard, necessary look at the log in our own eye. And I ask these questions because lately they keep surfacing in my own life.... For example, a few days ago, I had coffee with a pastor friend from another mainline denomination. She told me about her recent experience joining some colleagues who were quietly standing by in protest at the ICE building in Portland. She had gone to see for herself what was happening because she was curious, but afterward, the person who'd invited her became quite pushy, saying to her, "You need to be out here doing this, too!..." My friend was stunned by the statement, and she expressed her disagreement because she doesn't feel like that's where the Spirit is calling her to use her gifts. Long story short, she left that encounter feeling disrespected and confused.... As she was telling me the story, she wondered aloud, "How does it even make sense to insist that everyone would address injustice in the same way?" In response, I think I said something like, "It doesn't make sense! It doesn't make sense because each of us has different gifts, and God calls us to use those gifts in different ways!..." Then I shared with her about a colleague whose congregation is always out front leading the way on a variety of social justice issues. "It's great," I said. "And I'm glad they're leading the way. But it's also super annoying when that pastor keeps telling the rest of us that we should be doing what they're doing, while also implying that the things we're doing are less important...." She nodded and said, "Yeah! That's what I'm talking about!" Then I said to my friend, "One thing I've learned is that in this time when there are so many horrible injustices and heartbreaking situations surrounding us, none of us can do it all! And since we're likely to be in this for the long haul, each of us needs to keep asking ourselves this question over and over: 'What's mine to do, and what's NOT mine to do?...' I didn't share this with my friend at the time, but I'll share my source with you now. That wise bit of boundary-setting is something I learned from African American pastor Traci Blackmon, who was our presenter at the Byberg Preaching Workshop a few years ago. And speaking of the Rev. Blackmon, the day after my coffee date, she posted something on social media that caught my attention. Her post was responding to a group of Christians who were berating other Christians for "only" handing out Thanksgiving turkeys and not doing more to help people in need. Rev. Blackmon pointed out that the members of those congregations that were handing out turkeys are probably helping in other ways, too, but we may not

hear about it because it's not on the news. Then she said this, "Perhaps instead of berating those doing something...we could ask the question: why, in a nation of more than enough, are so many in need? And use our energy to change the system instead of [belittling] one another. Why are we like this?!?!?!"

Friends, Rev. Blackmon's question is right on point: Why are we like this? Why do the followers of Jesus prefer to focus our attention on what others are doing or not doing, even though Jesus himself instructs us to "keep awake" at all times and make sure our own house is in order because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour?... At one level, maybe it seems easier to stand at a distance and take cheap shots at someone else than it does to get up close and personal with the costly work of repentance and reform. Honestly, though, I think the main reason we'd rather focus on the shortcomings of others is because it's just too painful for us to look at our own shortcomings, and it's hard to admit we might be wrong – not only in how we view others, but also in how we view God.... Some of you know I have a favorite cartoon that illustrates this point, and I've asked Anne to put it up on the screen, so that you can see it.... In the first frame, Snoopy is sitting on top of his doghouse, typing on a typewriter. Charlie Brown approaches and says, "I hear you're writing a book on theology. I hope you have a good title" The next frame shows us Snoopy's thought bubble, in which he's thinking to himself, "I have the perfect title.... 'Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?'"



Friends, I think Snoopy's question, "Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?," is a good reminder that you and I should approach the Divine with humility, so that we'll be awake and ready to receive Christ whenever he comes to meet us.... "In today's story from Matthew 24, Jesus stands firm, telling his disciples not to worry about the when or the where of his coming in majesty, but to focus instead on the things we can actually do something about. In short, Jesus wants his friends to focus on the why and the how of living as his followers here and now. He tells us in essence, "Look, we're in this for the long haul; in the meantime, unexpected things will happen, and it will seem like they're happening randomly! Two couples will get married, and one of those couples will get divorced. Two people will be working side-by-side in cubicles; one will get cancer, and the other won't. Two friends will be attending the same high school; one will fall prey to the seductive power of drug addiction, and the other won't. Remember: God makes the sun rise and the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous alike!...."¹ According to Jesus, the way to navigate this seemingly random suffering that's beyond our control is to tend the flame of faith that's already been kindled within us. And so he urges his disciples, "Keep awake, pay attention to how you're living your life here and now, so that you don't literally miss the boat, as most people did back in the days of Noah...."² And then, just in case the flood story isn't enough to wake up his audience, Jesus compares his future advent to a thief breaking into a

¹ Matthew 5:45b.

² Cf. Matthew 24:38-39.

house -- dare I say -- at an “ungodly” hour, in the middle of the night... Now, I can’t speak for you, but having had our home burglarized while we out to dinner one night many years ago, I personally find it rather disturbing that Jesus compares the coming of the Son of Man to a thief breaking into a house! But I have to admit the analogy does lead me to wonder: Does our Lord need to surprise us by breaking in in this way? I mean, maybe we’ve locked the door to our hearts and barricaded it and won’t let him in otherwise! Or maybe we’ve surrounded ourselves with all kinds of things that give us a false sense of security, and now Jesus needs to strip us of our spiritual clutter and take it away, so that we’ll be able to recognize him and begin to see what truly matters....

And that inevitably leads us to this question: What is it that truly matters to Jesus? Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus being very clear in teaching that how his disciples spend our short lives here on earth matters.... To sum up, you and I are to live our lives in readiness for Christ’s advent among us, and we are to do this by “keeping awake,” so that we may perceive the new thing God is doing through the in-breaking of Christ’s Kin-dom.... To say it another way, in Matthew 24 Jesus reminds his disciples that we are to cultivate a prayerful awareness of what God is up to in our neighborhood and in our world, so that we’ll be prepared to answer the call when the Holy Spirit prompts us to align our respective gifts in support of God’s mission to love and bless the whole world.

I wonder: Where have you seen God at work lately? And how do you perceive the Spirit calling you to use your gifts by participating in God’s loving, liberating, life-giving mission?

[pass mic around]

Thanks be to God, who comes to us over and over again through Jesus Christ to reveal God’s reconciling love for the whole world! Amen.
