

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

“Just wait,” my mother would say. “Just wait. Just wait until your father comes home.” Then at other times, times when I behaved like Polly, she would say “Just wait! Just wait until your father comes home.” There were two types of waiting and both of them were pretty different. One was filled with joy and expectation and a sense of surprise, and who knew what would happen, but it was definitely good and worth looking forward to, like more toys. Or, it meant that I had done something really bad, and what was coming was not going to be pleasant at all. It certainly wasn’t worth waiting for, because behind the bathroom door in our home, my father hung his razor strap. A leather belt-like arrangement, about so long, about as wide as these cards. One side was black and one red, and he used it to hone his cut-throat razor, and to apply to my behind and legs when I was to face judgment for something terrible that I had done. You know, Advent is just like that.

It is sort of a time when we wait for good things. We are sort of anticipating Christmas, celebrating the birth of Christ, and all the wonderful things that come with it: the office parties, the new outfit, the presents, the family gathering, the food, the meal, Christmas Day, some time off work. All those things. But the other side of Advent is the uncomfortable side of Advent. The side that we don’t really want to think about too much, but if we are truthful and honest, sometimes it’s the side of things that bother us. We all know the things that we have done that we are not proud of, and we all know the things we have done that we are concerned that we just might get paid back for. At times all of us wonder just how God is going to be on that final day when the Son of Man doesn’t arrive and we are up for judgment.

Matthew does a pretty good job of this, doesn’t he? He seems to excel in the bad side of things. Did you hear the way he sort of built things up? He starts out by telling us that there is no way you know when it’s going to happen, so stop trying to figure it out. I guess that is sort of frightening in a way that we can’t anticipate when it is going to happen, but it is good news as well. When we hear some crank telling us that it is the end of the world, then we needn’t worry, because we can know for sure that they don’t know that at all. There is only one person who knows that day, and that is God and I can tell you, he is not telling!

The other thing that Matthew does is sort of scary about the suddenness of this sort of event, and how it comes about. Look at the story he has there about a flood. Some of you may remember the Johnstown flood tremendously damaging things. We have experienced floods in our own area. Hurricane Agnes, or the flood of the Susquehanna just this past winter, and last summer. And, then he talks about a kidnapping. That is kind of scary, isn’t it? Two of us standing at work, doing what we always do, and then one is gone and one is left. Men and women just going about their normal every day life. I guess it is great, for say, end-of-the-world novels and books, and things that scare people, but when you think about it, it is pretty frightening. Just how do we deal with that kind of thing? The third thing is something like a break in. God arrives like a thief in the night to suddenly bring all this stuff to an end. Certainly reminds me of the sort of forecast I got when my mother was really cranked up the way she would have been if I had acted like Polly, or when I did act like Polly. “You just wait!” She often added the you, “You just wait,” so we were clear about it, and my brothers

and sisters knew it wasn't them, it was me. Then she would finish it up by saying, "Just wait until your father comes home, young man!" That certainly meant razor strap territory had been entered.

The sort of things that were really bad that I did, that got me into a great deal of trouble, was like the time I walked through the single track railroad tunnel from our house to the next town. My parents were really upset about that. Especially my mother, and then to make things worse, it was Friday night and I walked back down home through town, in my mud-covered, soot-covered, grease-covered clothes, face and legs. Yeah, that was one time when I had to wait for Dad to come home. There was the time I spent my Sunday School offering in the candy store on the way to church, and the time I played in the shipyards around the steel stacks where I could have been crushed to death in a moment. So, being brought home, and being told that my father was coming meant really bad news, particularly bad news.

That is something that we can get concerned about. It is something that often worries people when facing severe illness, or when they know they are coming toward the end of their life. It can be a very threatening thing to think about appearing before God. It is worse than appearing before Dad, it is worse than appearing before the principal, it is worse than appearing before a magistrate, if any of you have had that experience. But, I want to ask you this; is that really what Matthew is saying? Is he really saying that, or is he saying something else? Let's go back and look at that text.

You will notice that when he tells the story of about Noah what he says is that the people will be ordinary people. They weren't being brats like Polly, or real demons like me. They were being ordinary, everyday, people. It wasn't anything terrible that they were doing. They were just living ordinary lives. What was the problem? The problem, Matthew says, was just that. That focused on themselves, that lost sight of their relationship with God and what that relationship might mean for them, and how it might affect how they lived with other people. The problem was just in the every day, ordinariness of their lives, and in their failure to look for the presence of God in serving him, being near him, and being in his presence.

So, what are we to do? How are we to make sure that we have things okay? Well, Isaiah tells us that. Did you hear the end of the lesson? "Walk in the light," says Isaiah. Walk in the light; live in the light, live enlightened lives. Paul goes on to say, live honorably, as if in the day. What he is saying is, live open lives that can be looked at, and have nothing to fear from people who might judge it, or have rotten things to say about it. And, finally, Matthew says, be ready. Be ready. There are two ways to do that. Two things that happened in this service that lead us into that be readiness and living in that light. You saw one of them this morning. You saw Emma Leisl baptized. Did you hear all the things that were going on in that baptism? It talked about knowing the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, reading scriptures and being involved in worship. That, somehow, is the ground work for what was denied, and what was denied was evil. Did you hear the renunciation of the devil and his empty promises?

Not that we can beat evil on our own, because we can't, but Christ will stand with us as we try to resist it. When we collapse and can't resist it, and fall into the things that we do that make us ashamed of ourselves, and concerned. Then we can throw ourselves on God's mercy, and ask for forgiveness. What does he tell us about that? He will forgive us once, twice, three strikes and you are out! Is that God? Tell me, is it? No, it is seven times seven forgiveness. A continual forgiveness. A

reminder that you can't get through human life without Christ with you. A reminder that you can't be perfect either, but that Christ will make the perfection for us.

Did you see the other thing that happened in the baptism? We lit a tiny candle. What did we say about that walking in the light? Do you remember? Emma Leisl, let your light so shine before other that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven. What are we talking about when we are talking about that? Later on, Matthew makes it very clear in the gospel. He talks about what it is like when the last day comes, and when things are sorted out. It is the sorting that worries us. You know, the sheep being separated from the goats, the wheat being separated from the chaff, the weeds being separated from the good crop. We get worried about that because we are concerned that we are going to finish up on the wrong pile, right? Remember what Matthew says in the story. These people all come before the Lord, and they are judged. There are people who are accepted, and they say, what is this thing, how come I am accepted? When Jesus says, you served me and they say, we didn't serve you. When did we serve you? Do you remember what his answer was? "I was sick and you cared for me, I was hungry and you gave me food, I was in prison and you visited me." Do you remember those? That's what living in the light is. To live amongst one another, and with one another, as caring companions, in this difficult life. That is what it means. To live with one another as Christ offers to live with us.

That is the first thing, and the second thing is what Advent teaches about waiting for Christmas. You ought to wait for Christmas with excitement and anticipation. You might not have a family to go home to, you might not even have a Christmas tree to go home to, but it is Christmas. It is great to sing the Christmas carols. It is good to enjoy the food. It is a wonderful excuse to go to your favorite diner and blitz out on a good meal, is it not? I mean, it is only one day in the year, isn't it? That is what I say about my diet! What do you say about yours?

The other important thing about Advent, the thing we are waiting for, the celebration of the birth of Christ, do you remember how that happened? Do you remember how many people realized what was going on and turned up to see what would happen? Do you remember who came? Can you tell me? The shepherds, the wise men. The shepherds who were the outcasts, the downtrodden people who work with sheep. Have you ever been around sheep? Clearly not! If you work around them there is something about them that rubs off on you. Smelly, dirty things, so nobody wants much to do with shepherds. They were doing their job at night and paid attention to what was happening, and caught a glimpse of the divine. Who were the others? These three wise men, these magi, these foreigners, these Gentiles. What did these do? They came and brought gifts.

See what Matthew is saying? Eyes open, be aware, every person that you encounter embodies Christ. When you look into the eyes of your neighbor, you look into the eyes of Christ. When you meet the needs of your neighbor, you meet the needs of Christ. That is what it is to walk in the light and then, when the last day does come, it won't come as something terrible at all. It will come as something like a great and joyous surprise. Something like what happened after my mother would say to me, "Just wait. Just you wait until your father comes home!" Just you wait.

Amen.

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