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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2022

Lectionary Year A: Romans 11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Coming off of the Thanksgiving holiday, we are, of course, thrown right into the season of Advent, and maybe some of you are still trying to finish off an array of Thanksgiving leftovers and haven't had time to shift gears. Add to that the disturbing succession of current events and we might find that it was challenging to think of things to be thankful for on Thursday and to get ourselves into an "Advent state of mind" today.

But actually, the season of Advent is very timely, especially amid the unrest we continue to witness in the world around us. In the Scriptural texts assigned for the four Sundays of Advent, we find both gloom-and-doom and hope. The liturgical calendar by which we're guided through the seasons very deftly presents everything, and doesn't side-step life's harsher realities.

Nor does it dwell on them, either...

We live, instead, with a "both/and" -- both the good and the bad in this life won't last forever. Someday, the end will come and there will be "forever," with the final defeat of the bad and the eternal reign of the Good. That will be when Jesus Christ returns to establish his kingdom, with all the faithful finally inheriting "the life of the world to come," to borrow a phrase from the Nicene Creed.

Much as Advent seems to prepare us for Christ's birth at Christmas, it, in many

other ways, prepares us for Christ's return to judge the living and the dead. This lends a gravity to the season that we wouldn't get were we to only look forward to Jesus' birth in the Bethlehem stable. Furthermore, Advent demands a humility from us that acknowledges the incompleteness of our comprehension of God's timing. This morning, we hear in the Gospel of Matthew of "the unexpected hour." Maybe we'd like to know when that time will be, but -- guess what -- we cannot. Only God knows.

We've all seen cleaning services guaranteeing that they're on-call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And there have likely been persons who have taken advantage of this twenty-four hour service -- say, for example, a few desperate teenagers who, knowing that Mom and Dad will be coming home around noon, need these cleaning services after hosting a wild party without Mom and Dad's permission. One can imagine the house in complete disarray and needing to be returned to the exact state in which it was left, with no evidence of anything untoward ever happening.

So, the kids call the cleaning service in the wee hours of the morning, and, just a little later, a van pulls up to the house, two guys from the cleaning service step out, are let into the house, and get to work. In remarkably short order, the house is restored to the exact state in which it was left. By now, the sun has risen, and the kids have to settle up with the cleaning service, and, naturally, it's a very hefty bill that requires them to blow most of the savings they accumulated over the summer. But, it's good to have this done and it'll keep them out of trouble.

Little did they know that Mom and Dad decided to drive all night home from

wherever they were instead of stopping someplace to rest, thereby subtracting at least six hours from their journey. Just as the kids are breathing a sigh of relief and the two guys from the cleaning service are getting back into their van, Mom and Dad pull into the driveway and -- understandably -- wonder why this cleaning service van is about to pull out of their driveway at such an early hour of the morning.

Let's just say that Mom and Dad are not naive enough to believe there was an innocent sewer backup or the cleaning service guys were lost; thus, the kids realize they've been busted and you can take the scenario from there...

At that "unexpected hour," none of us wants to be like those kids.

I'd be curious to know, however, the percentage of calls those twenty-four hour cleaning services get from desperate teenagers after a wild party in comparison to, say, those discovering an innocent sewer backup in their basement. And, for the record, I never lived through either scenario myself!

But those kids who called the cleaning service thought they knew when Mom and Dad were coming home...or at least had a rough estimate. As for there being any absolute guarantee of when something will happen, though, that's not ours to know. Only God knows.

And had those kids known better, they might've taken the advice of the apostle Paul from today's Second Reading, where Paul says, "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy" (Romans 11:12b-13). In other words, they

shouldn't have thrown the party in the first place. But when you're a kid, that's often easier said than done...

How about thinking of it this way?

Don't do something that's wrong or morally questionable, instead do what is right.

In this context, Jesus tells us, simply, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42). To me, this says, "Live as if you know Jesus is coming, but you don't know when." We are called to have the humility and quietness of mind to dial our worldly impulses back a bit, which is not easy to do given the images and messages with which we're bombarded in the weeks leading up to Christmas. That's just not the way the culture around us operates.

But what if those kids had a quiet night at home while their parents were away instead of throwing a wild party? Merely from a financial standpoint, that would've spared them an enormous expense. And, presumably, they wouldn't have had to face the consequences of their parents' punishment, either. A simple cost-benefit analysis would surely favor, in any situation, not throwing a party when Mom and Dad were away. Furthermore, I would have to ask those kids after they got busted by their parents, "Was it really that fun?"

Now, think of our Lord and Savior being on his way. What would we be better off doing? Would a wild party really be much more fun (or worthwhile) than staying at home quietly? I must say, now that I'm -- ahem -- older, some quiet time at home or in my shop doesn't sound too bad, and I actually wish I would've learned this when I was younger. But I'm starting to catch on and I

hope you are, too. Preparing for the coming of Christ by being quiet and keeping awake is, indeed, preparing for something good. Emmanuel -- God with us -- is on his way to bring his grace and peace to a troubled, distracted, and dysfunctional world. And now, let our witness to this world be so unexpected and weird and counterintuitive that we get the world's attention by our quiet watchfulness amid the noise and hardship and terror.

Hope for a better world -- a world transformed by Christ -- is a very Advent hope. And it doesn't matter if this happens tomorrow or in a million years; we assume the same posture regardless. The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Prepare for his mercy and grace. Don't be calling the cleaning service in the wee hours of the morning because of the "situation" you've gotten yourself into. Do the opposite, in fact: Put your heart, mind, and soul through the cleaning service given to you by God in Holy Baptism, and strengthen your union with Christ by remembering that you have been baptized into Christ, and he will be with you spiritually every hour until he returns in-person at that unexpected hour. His mercy will be upon you because he has made you his own forever.

And that's worth keeping awake for...

Amen.