

November 27, 2016
1st Sunday of Advent
Matt. 24:36-44
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Do you know someone who just seems to epitomize the Boy Scout motto to “always be prepared”? While I don’t really know why or how he came to live like this, my father is one person I know whose decisions in life seem to follow that sage advice to always be prepared. I remember how meticulously he would arrange his hunting gear the night before the first day of deer hunting season, which in Pennsylvania is the Monday after Thanksgiving. He would lay out his long underwear, thermal socks, big woolen red plaid hunting coat and wool pants, heavy boots and woolen cap with earflaps, the hand-warmer, and of course the gun and shells, the knife, and a rope to drag the deer he anticipated getting. There was a sort of comforting ritual to watching this preparation.

Some years ago now, my father told my brother and me that he and my mother have pre-paid the costs for their funeral and burial arrangements. They have written down several hymns they would like to have included in their simple funerals to be held at their church. They have cemetery plots designated at the church cemetery. They have completed advance directives and final wills. This is such a gift to my brother and me, their having done all this pre-planning and preparation. I am most grateful for my father’s diligence and foresight, his care in being and living prepared for the future – at least for one of the parts he knows will come some day. There is a lot to be said for living and “being prepared”.

Today is the 1st Sunday of Advent, when we enter a season of expectation, of waiting and preparing. However, you will not find the word “Advent” in Scripture. This term Advent is from the Latin word “*adventus*”, which means “coming”. It’s rather strange that the Christian New Year begins with Scriptures focused on the “end times”, the point at which Christ will return - in judgment, and with the wholeness, peace, and fullness of God’s kingdom come in power and great glory. Advent proclaims the coming of the Lord, which is not the same as saying Christmas Day is coming. Advent is a time to open our hearts more to Christ, to get prepared for his coming to us.

But in those images from Matthew’s gospel we heard, Jesus does not offer us warm, fuzzy, and comforting words about needing to live prepared. They are vivid and jarring. There can be a tendency to interpret Scriptures about “the end times” as full of threat and a cause for alarm. Such readings can leave us with a sense of dismay, foreboding, and maybe even wanting to run and hide rather than prepare!

Yet all of Scripture points to the fact that God cares and comes into this world. In light of Jesus' first coming, it is good to remember that today's readings are meant as a call for us to be alert and watchful. They offer us an opportunity to get our hearts and minds, our priorities and actions realigned with Christ, and they provide a reason for hope. These words about "end times" remind us we live both in a time of promise, and a time that is characterized by "not knowing".

The images Jesus uses to describe his second coming are disturbing, sharp and intrusive. First, he says the time of the coming of the Son of Man will be like the great flood in the day of Noah – sudden and cataclysmic, catching the complacent and spiritually dull completely unaware. The Lord's return will happen in the midst of ordinary people doing ordinary tasks on ordinary days. And on that day, one will be taken and another left – like a kidnapping has taken place. No one would expect the Lord to return in the middle of an otherwise routine day, while men are working out in the fields and women are grinding meal. And that day of unexpected coming will be like a thief, sneaking in when the house is left unattended. Could it be that the owner has become less vigilant and alert to the possibility of intruders?

These vivid images do grab our attention, just as they would have gotten the attention of Jesus' disciples, to whom he was speaking. While the words and images are disturbing, at the heart of this passage is Jesus' promise, just a few verses prior to today's reading, that when he comes he "will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (*Matt. 24:31*).

And the unexpectedness of all this is where a lot of our anxiety lies, in the "not knowing". No one knows, Jesus says in today's passage – neither angels nor even he himself – no one knows when this will take place except the Father.

Well, it's not just the end of time and history that is unexpected. Much of life is like that. Life is unpredictable and we are not in control. We are regularly caught off guard – sometimes joyfully, like when we fall in love, or become pregnant, or receive an unanticipated gift. But often what catches us off guard is neither desirable nor pleasant. Natural disasters point to the precarious and unpredictable nature of life in our world on a grand scale. But other things like a lost job, a miscarriage, heart attack, death of a loved one, or other personal unanticipated setbacks can also bring us to our knees and threaten any semblance of order we had imagined we'd created for ourselves.

Oh, we do our best to try to protect ourselves against the unexpected. We buy medical insurance and life insurance. We install smoke detectors in our homes and keep fire extinguishers within arm's reach. Towns and cities have emergency preparedness and

evacuation plans. Sometimes the way we protect ourselves from the unexpected is by not taking a risk on a dream for fear of failure. Or by shielding ourselves from possible disappointments in relationships. Or by numbing ourselves to the pain of others or turning away from others lest their pain haunt us with the possibility of our own loss.

Part of the spiritual work of making the Advent journey is taking stock of our lives, doing some honest self-examination. What is it that we most fear about an uncertain future? Now is a good time to name those things and offer them to God. And let us also remember the promise that whether or not our immediate fears are realized, we were created for more than fear because Jesus, the Son of Man and Son of God, has promised to come always to be both *with us and for us*.

The good news is that all our times are in God's hands and we will not face the future alone. Come hell or high water, Jesus will be at our side, giving us courage in the face of life's adversities and remaining with us even through death, drawing us into new life.

We are offered again during this Advent, a season to prepare, a time to wait, a call to remember that underneath all that seems so impermanent and near crumbling, there is a firm foundation, and the One who came, comes, and will come again, is always for us and for the whole world.

We have good tools and we have needed support for living prepared in uncertain times. Our tools are our spiritual disciplines: confession and repentance, individual and communal prayer, meditation, worship and receiving the Eucharist, study of Scripture, and service to others. The support we have is each other, the Christian community, the body of Christ, and the ability to share our spiritual journeys with one another.

In light of Jesus' promise, one of our Advent tasks of preparation is to name some of the anxiety of our lives and leave it behind. As the days grow shorter and the darkness lengthens, we light Advent candles each week here to remind us that we do not face the darkness alone but that indeed, the light of the world has come, shining on in the darkness to illumine our lives and lead us forth not in fear but in courage and confidence. . .and even joy. We have our Lord's promise of presence and blessing. So let us claim Jesus' promise anew when together we say in the Eucharistic prayer in just a few moments: "We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory."

Let us pray: "Lord God, you have called us your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but assured that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

[prayer by The Rev. Dr. David Lose]