

Advent 1 November 27, 2022

Isaiah 2: 1 - 5

Romans 13: 11 - 14

Matthew 24: 36 - 44

This First Sunday of Advent brings us to a new Church year. We begin a new cycle of Gospel readings from Matthew and we turn our focus to the coming of Christ. This is a new season for our congregational life together. In past years I've celebrated this, even going as far as to start a sermon wishing a "Happy New Year," and mentioning that in the Church we get a little more of a month's jump on the rest of the world in celebrating this new year. But this year I have to say that although we have a new year that we mark together this morning, we still face many of the same circumstances that have weighed us down in the past: just this past week we have unfortunately seen another outbreak in the epidemic of gun violence, once again come down upon our nation like a landslide. From the University of Virginia, to Club Q, a LGBT plus inclusive club in Colorado Springs, to a Walmart in southern Virginia, lives suddenly cut short by hate and easy access to firearms, dozens gravely wounded, and as the *New York Times* noted, "fourteen empty chairs around the Thanksgiving tables," this week. But a new year, a new season brings hope, even in the face of this tragedy spurred by the epidemic of gun violence, a hope that we can do better, that we can address the hatred and nihilism, address the disregard for human life, and that we can hope that our elected officials will respond and that our infatuation with guns will be curbed. But as my father always reminded me when I was growing up, 'hope is not a plan,' and although the promise of a new year brings hope, it is up to us, our neighbors and our communities to put this hope into action. Hard work, hard work, yes, but work we are called to do if that hope has any chance of becoming real.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as we hear your word and as our hopes are lifted, grant that we may also grow in faith and action. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

This Season of Advent, as I just mentioned, this is the period given over in our Church life together to focus on the coming of Christ. Even though the season is new, this focus has been a concern for Christians since our beginnings. As we hear today, Paul in addressing the community of the followers of Christ in Rome saw that this concern is central to our Christian self understanding. And even then, in those early days of Christian mission, this was not new; far from it, as Paul says, "You know what time it is, how now is the moment for you to wake from sleep. For

salvation is nearer to us now, than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." That repeated emphasis, "now" and "near," not something much later or far off, but soon to take place in the here and now. What a shock that must have been for those who heard Paul's words: there they were, gathered together in the belly of the beast, a small community, probably only dozens at most, and most likely a collection of diverse people from all over the Empire, those who saw the great luxury of Caesar's court, those who most likely also knew of its immense power and brutality, but also those now walking on an alternative way, seeing in Jesus the promise of salvation made real in their lives against the hollow, empty glittering images of Empire and triumph. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Paul exhorts this gathering to set their gaze and their hopes in a different direction, to look for the coming of Christ in their midst, to bring God's reign of mercy and love, of justice and peace even to the seat of temporal power of their era.

Paul echoes the teachings of Jesus only a few decades earlier in Palestine: even as Jesus faced the religious authorities of his day, as he entered into that final confrontation in Jerusalem, still Jesus looks to the future, to the coming reign of God's peace in the world. But this advent of God's reign of peace, the coming of God's Chosen One, is both unexpected and unknowable. As Jesus says, in the days of Noah, no one except Noah knew the flood was to arrive soon; yes, unexpected, and as Jesus goes on to say, if the house owner knew when the thief was to come, the house owner would stay awake and not let the house get broken into: yes, unknowable. But still, even in its unexpected and unknowable characteristics, the one thing Jesus calls his friends to is watchfulness: "keep awake, be ready": these are the watchwords of Jesus to his friends, keep awake and be ready, because God's Chosen One is to come, God's promise, God's reign are not far off from us. And again, what a shock this too must have been for those who heard Jesus' words in Jerusalem in that time: how could the reign of God be coming without anyone knowing, unexpected by the religious authorities, the great teachers and scholars, the scribes and priests, how could it take them unawares, how could this great transformation come, when really it must have just seemed that day after day, the grinding poverty, the great injustices, the lack of concern for the mass of the people simply continued to churn without end? But Jesus, Jesus exhorts his friends, both warns them but I think even more importantly, Jesus points them in a new direction, away from the daily grind, and in faith to set their eyes on a further horizon, on the promise of God, a promise made to Israel in the

past, to their spiritual ancestors and a promise that Jesus seeks to renew and restore in his life. Jesus, walking in his Way of Love, serves as an example to followers of the manner that this promise now re-orientes our lives to the coming of God's reign of peace and mercy, of justice and love: keep awake, be ready!

Looking to a future horizon, Jesus of course, builds on the past: the vision of Isaiah, over half a millennium prior, this vision is what that future will entail, what God is seeking in the restoration of creation: those stirring words, "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." That vision has captured the imaginations of people across the generations. In the 1950s, with the location of the United Nations in New York City, a park was created across the street from the UN Building and carved into a stone wall in the park, these words of Isaiah daily remind the delegates and leaders of their mission in their work together. For a number of years while I served as the rector of St Mary's Church in West Harlem, we would go there at 12 noon on Fridays in Lent and chant the Great Litany from the *Book of Common Prayer* in a solemn procession to ask for God's mercy as we failed to live up to that vision in our own day. But still, even in asking for God's mercy for our failings, our weakness to accomplish God's mission, still I believe that we were reminding ourselves and those who heard us to keep awake, be ready: that we are called to pray and act, looking forward to this horizon of God's coming reign of love and peace.

So today, today my sisters and brothers, we gather here with this call once again to keep awake, to be ready, to lift our eyes from our present circumstances and failings, from our weakness of faith and lack of effort, to open our eyes both to Isaiah's vision of peace and Paul's sense that our salvation is nearer to us than ever. But we are called to be ready, to keep awake in a world that already claims our attention with the spectacle of violence and destruction. In many ways, there is a train wreck going on around us: the chaos of our polarized and divided nation, systematic racism which stills calls out to be dismantled, our call as those baptized in the Name of God to respect the dignity of every human being, especially our LGBTQ plus sisters and brothers at a time when they are under attack, and of course that ultimate existential threat to us and our world, the climate disaster that is still going on, perhaps even getting worse despite our efforts: it is hard to take our eyes off these and all the other disasters we face day in and day out. Jesus, Paul and Isaiah, indeed all our spiritual traditions, though, call us now to focus our attention in a new direction:

this Season of Advent is a time of hope: now and not far off, here and coming soon, our salvation is on the horizon with the coming of Christ, coming once more to our lives, with that Spirit of Love to open up our souls, to transform our lives and the life of the world around us. As we opened our worship today in prayer, we asked God for the grace to cast away the works of darkness, that God's light may enter our lives even in the chaos we face, a light to see with the eyes of faith God's goodness, God's loving kindness, near to us and coming soon. May this grace grow ever stronger, ever brighter this Advent season, a light to bring us hope. Thanks be to God for this amazing grace and thanks be to Christ for lighting our path in this Way of Love. Amen.