

“Knowing How it Ends”
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44
First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2010
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On the surface, it seems like everything is falling into place as it should in this holiday season. Thanksgiving is past, we’ve made a significant dent in the leftovers, and now we can turn our attention to the big show. (As if on cue the snow has started falling and dreams of a white Christmas might actually be realized!) Of course it’s also setting in for many of us that there is so much to be done, and we just don’t know how we’re going to be ready in time. We know the end date – December 25 – only 27 shopping days left, including Sundays.

That’s on the surface, and that’s where we’ll be spending a lot of our time and expending much of our energy, not to mention our money, over these next few weeks. It feels like a race, every year. But at least we know what we’re shooting for, and hopefully we’ll arrive there not having depleted all our reserves, so that we can truly enjoy the time.

In the church we observe the season in much the same way as the culture of which we are a part. It’s a busy season for us, too, of course – extra events, services and celebrations to prepare for, seasonal decorations to display, gifts to give to those in need beyond our immediate families and friends. We share in the general good will of the season, and in all these ways it is a wonderful time of the year.

But when you are committed to lectionary preaching, the Gospel reading on the first Sunday of Advent most always causes preachers, including this one, to wince, if not grimace with pain. The facial expression is an outward and visible sign of an inward and personal struggle that often goes on between us and the text, whatever the time of year – that struggle between where the text wants to take us, and staying where we think we want

to be.

Now that we've gotten past Thanksgiving, we've got Christmas on our minds. We're tilting toward December 25, and we have all the expectations that entails.

The gospel reading today from Matthew 24 is at odds with this expectation because it tilts toward a different day altogether. Matthew and the Jesus he presents seem not at all interested in Christmas, but are focused on that day in the unknown future, when the Son of Man will suddenly return and lives will be suddenly and surprisingly changed – nothing about the baby born in a barn, but the One who is coming to meet us at the end of time.

Each year it hits me with a jolt, this “out of synch” season of Advent with its troubling scenarios, describing, literally or metaphorically, what is meant by that “he shall come again” language of Scripture and the Apostles’ Creed that we tend to just gloss over when it comes around. In Advent there is both the powerful push toward Christmas and an equally powerful pull away from this other stuff.

The problem, you see, was the delay in all this coming about. Christians in Matthew’s day (1st and 2nd generation Christians) were embarrassed by the delay in the Son of Man’s return, and they took a lot of grief from their opponents. Matthew the gospel writer wants to acknowledge the uncertainty about this – and in the meantime, whether it be two weeks or two thousand or three thousand years, to stand in faithful watchfulness for the God who was at the beginning, and so shall be at the end. He wants us to believe that, as Isaiah puts it, “the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains . . .,” that the nations “shall beat swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks . . .” He wants us to believe that someday the Son of Man is coming to gather up and redeem all the brokenness and loose ends of the world and of our lives. And to believe this is to give our lives purpose and direction.

It is to clarify what is important now in light of the end – what to value, now. As Tom

Long puts it, “If the dam twenty minutes upstream breaks, then the Rembrandt on the wall is less valuable than the rubber raft in the attic.” Knowing what is coming clarifies things now.

Does it? That’s the question of Advent. Do the promises of our God as are revealed to us in the scriptures – those things as yet unfulfilled – have the authority and the power in our lives to carry our days, to move us, to lead us through our days, that are often plagued with darkness, uncertainty and fear, sometimes within us, often around us?

We tend to go pretty light on the judgment of God in churches like ours, especially in the holiday season. We aren’t big into trying to scare people into faith or the Christian life with scenarios of final days or raging fires of hell that await the unrepentant. But the message of the gospel is not without judgment. God help us if we have not known the judgment of God in our own lives – when God’s truth has confronted us in our own falsehood, when we, in our own way, have been living at cross purposes with God’s way. In our gospel lesson this morning Jesus reminds his listeners of the days of Noah, when people “were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . . and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away.” What didn’t they know? Well, they hadn’t heard about the dam break and they wanted to hang on to the Rembrandt at all costs. They clung to the things of this world as if they had ultimate value, and so what is of ultimate value was lost to them. It’s the same story with us. Will all of our busyness save us? Will all of our plans and our preparations ensure our peace? Will our financial portfolios promise our security? What is the end toward which we are living, and for which the church is called to give its life?

Ted Wardlaw tells of how years ago he knew of a prominent African-American pastor who served a large and powerful church in Harlem, above 125th Street. From its gothic spire, he says, you could see just about everything you wanted to see, or more

accurately, what one wouldn't want to see: blocks of burned-out buildings, shabby little pawn shops and boarded up storefronts and roach-infested grocery stores, in the shadows of which prostitutes and crack dealers plied their trades. Many churches had given up and moved elsewhere, but this church continued to hang on – keeping watch, staying alert, as if every moment mattered. They organized a locally-owned bank so the neighborhood could have a bank, they set up latch-key programs for children, they put together neighborhood redevelopment agencies, they organized Bible studies in high-rises, they conducted successful boycotts against price-gouging corporations. But still, it was Harlem.

A newspaper reporter once interviewed this pastor and said, “Sure, you’re doing great stuff. But it’s hard to see any difference any of that is making. What enables you and your folks to keep going?” The pastor said, “We’ve read the Bible, and we know how it ends. We aren’t at the end yet,” he went on, “but we know how it ends, and that’s what makes the difference.”

Advent would direct us toward the end that is of God, and we approach it not in fear or with anxiety, but in confidence and with hope because of the day that has already dawned in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the new life that is assured through faith in him. We live between the times, but we live not in fear of a future unknown, but in gratitude for the kingdom that Christ already offers us. God’s light has already shined in the darkness, and the darkness, though very real, has not overcome it. We are witnesses. To live between the times is to live in trust and in hope that God has begun, and will continue, to transform us more and more into the stature of Christ, in whom all of God’s mercy and loving kindness dwells.

This is the church’s observance of Advent, witnessing in the present darkness to the glorious light of God’s promised end. It is what makes all the difference. We worship a God in whose presence we are wrenched away from the world as it is in order to get a

view of the world as it will be – and we are called to take our part in that awesome task. God’s holy power keeps shaping us, keeps feeding us the bread and cup of the table, and time after time we remember how it all ends and therefore what is finally important about our lives in the meantime.

Keep awake, therefore, for you know how it ends.

Let us pray: O God of Advent, keep us watchful in this season of your coming. Surprise us with your calling, gathering, enlightening presence that comes even in the midst of our waiting. You have taught us that without a vision the people perish. Hold before us in this season the vision of your prophet Isaiah, that your people will learn your ways and walk in your paths, and that of our own accord we shall fashion the weapons of war into instruments of healing and life. In these days when on the surface of things all is glitter and gladness, take us to deeper places, where our faith is awakened by the undercurrents of the story that is told again and again through the lives of those who know how the story ends. Prepare in us, O God, a place of welcome for your homecoming among us. Amen.