

30 November 2025
Advent Sunday, Year A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalms 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

In the Name of God whose coming we await. Amen.

There's a saying that timing is everything. Today, on the First Sunday of Advent, we step into a new time, a new liturgical year, a new season of preparing to celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation. The colors are different and there's a little bit more quiet as we count down the weeks until Christmas.

Many of us bemoan the commercial world where Santa has been in stores for weeks already. There was Black Friday that began way before Friday, and Small Business Saturday, then Cyber Monday, and all the rest. Overall, we seem to have a very hard time waiting for things.

Is it so different here, in church? Who doesn't want to fast forward a bit? To get to the really beautiful prophecies of Isaiah? To our favorite Nativity stories? And yet, here we are, all done up in dark blue, trudging through another set of readings about the End Times. I mean, really, it can make us a little grumpy, can't it? After all, Advent is only four Sundays long – can't we just move on? No, we really can't.

Advent is not simply a countdown of the shopping days until Christmas, or a progression of chocolate treats from an Advent Calendar. Advent is also the season when we grieve the sinfulness and brokenness of our world, and find ourselves crying out for the end, for the coming of the judgment of our righteous God.

The Rev. Fleming Rutledge, one of the first women to be ordained to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church reminds us that, "[Advent] can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in the time between the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead."¹

Advent is the season where "The king is coming" is a cry of hope in the midst of darkness, suffering, and pain. Advent, Mother Fleming points out, starts in the dark, and isn't for sissies.

Listen again to Isaiah -- *In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob."* Does this sound

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, Eerdmans, 2018.

like folks who are faint of heart? Paralyzed with inaction, and just hoping for the best? It does not.

It sounds like an urgent, hit-the-road-and-head-for-the-house-of-God kind of thing. And once there, they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, because they no longer need the weapons of destruction and fear.

The Psalmist sings out, "I was glad when they said to me, 'let us go to the house of the Lord.'"

Paul also adopts an urgent tone in his letter to the Church at Rome: *you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep...The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*

There are parts of the little gay kid from North County in me that still cringe when I hear things like, "lay aside the works of darkness." The grownup me wants to invite you to imagine for a moment what it might feel like to think about casting away the works of darkness not simply because they, or we, are bad with a capital BAD, but because they're unnecessary and you don't need them anymore. You don't need the works of darkness anymore because the Day is at hand.

The early Christians to whom Matthew was writing (about 50 years after the resurrection) had been expecting Jesus to return for quite some time. Some commentators think that one of the purposes of the Gospels was to encourage Christians who were baffled and disheartened by Jesus' delayed return.

Matthew, following Mark, devotes a portion of his Gospel to urging his listeners to say awake, be prepared, and wait with anticipation. Matthew's imagery is compelling and dramatic: one taken, one left behind; thieves in the night.

The American novelist Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures."²

It seems to me that's what's going on in this section of Matthew. Jesus shouts, he draws startling figures, he uses every rhetorical device at his disposal to snap his listeners to attention. "Keep watch," he warns, for no one knows when the thief is coming.

Ok, now Jesus has our attention. But, what in the world are we supposed to do with a Son of Man who describes himself as a thief, a robber? A cat burglar who shows up in the night and takes things away from us. Things we care about. Things we're 100% sure we have to have.

Is it possible that we should prepare to be robbed? We love to sing, "let every heart prepare him room," but how can we prepare him room if the house of our heart is already filled to the rafters with the things we think we just can't live without?

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/80562-the-novelist-with-christian-concerns-will-find-in-modern-life>

Perhaps Jesus comes as a thief because we need to be robbed. Perhaps Jesus breaks in because our valuables have become liabilities, and we need an intruder to swoop in and take what we won't willingly give up.

Marie Kondo, the so-called Queen of Decluttering, tells us that if something doesn't bring us joy, we should toss it out. In addition to being a very clever branding strategy, this sounds like a pretty solid Advent theology.

What are you holding on to that no longer brings you joy? What are you clinging to that Jesus needs to steal? Apathy? Fear? Self-righteousness? Self-loathing? A broken heart? An unforgiving heart?

Maybe it is no coincidence that the Son of Man comes in the night, when we're asleep and vulnerable. When else would it be possible to let go of the false gods we grasp? When else would we be able to cooperate with the deep work of God in our lives?

Ours is a God who constantly calls us out of the darkness of self-involvement into the light of self-offering. Here's an image. When you come to Holy Communion, you open your hands because you can't receive the Body of Christ if your hands are closed. You can't be filled until you are emptied.

In the same way, if your fists are balled up and shoved into your pockets, the first thing that's going to happen is that you will stumble and fall. The tighter your hands are clenched in fear, the less able you are to be open to others, to be open to relationship, to be open to the working of God within and among you.

The most important question for this Advent season is, are you clenched in fear, or do you stand up on your tippy toes, scanning the horizon in joyful expectation?

I've said this before, but let me be clear. I am not talking about a "don't worry, be happy" theology. The judgment of Christ at the end of the ages ought to cause all of us some concern. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – the glory that God created us to participate in, to enjoy, to be. But I believe that huddling in the dark in fear is also sin. Lay aside the works of darkness.

+ + +

In a few moments we will affirm that we believe in Jesus who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. I do not believe that this judgment is about Jesus coming to "fry" those who are in some way deficient. No. We await the coming in glory of our Savior who will embrace everything in us that reflects God's image.

Everything else – sin – is done away. For we also believe that our sin, every sin, all sin, was nailed to the cross when Jesus was. It was paid for by his passion, and its lasting effect vanquished when he rose from the dead. The gift that the Church gives us every Advent is the opportunity to remember this profound truth, and then re-shape our lives. But, how?

You know, try as we might, we really can't stop sinning on our own. There's a Collect that reminds us that "we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves."³ When we attempt to get rid of our character defects on our own, we just end up in a boxing match with our shortcomings – with our fists all balled up...again.

So, what are we supposed to do? Since we've been thinking about robbers this morning, I want to offer you some thoughts from the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, who writes about the Divine Pickpocket.⁴

"We can only dare to let go of evil in the presence of a perfect love. Don Quixote steals the shame of Aldonza by his continual respect for her. Love makes sin unnecessary and takes it away.

"What do you think happens when God forgives your sin? Is it God changing suddenly, reassessing you? Is it God deciding to waive some eternal and required punishment? No! Nothing happens in God. God is perfect givenness, totally and always given, literally *fore-given*: ahead of time, before our act of faith.

"God does not change; we change. Here is what's happening in the experience of forgiveness: When God's arms are tight enough around you, when for a moment you can believe in love, when you let God gaze into your eyes deeply enough and are ready to believe it, then you're able to let God rob you of your sin. God pulls it out of your pocket while holding you in her gaze!"

In the dark of night and in the cold of winter, the challenge of the Advent season is learning once more how to live expectantly. Discovering how to walk in hope, with open hands and open hearts, confident in the extravagant love of God, who wants nothing more than to steal your sins.

Take heart, dear friends, for the king is coming ... soon.

A blessed Advent to you all. Amen.

³ Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent, Traditional.

⁴ Richard Rohr, from *Days of Renewal*.