

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The horses are fidgety, all tense, ready to spring away with jockeys on their backs. Restless, they shuffle enclosed, trapped in the paddocks at the starting line. And then, there is the shout, "They're off!"

Well, metaphorically, they are us. The church on this, the first Sunday in Advent, the opening of yet another liturgical year in the history of the church. We begin anew the story of the gospel. Today.

And yet, not really. After all, the gospel reading from Matthew appointed for today focuses on the second coming of Jesus. What is that about? We should be working with John the Baptist's messages, appropriate in anticipation of the first coming, the birth of the baby who will become Emanuel, "God with us". But instead, we hear about the need to stay awake, as no one will know when it will happen. Talk about misleading and confusing. Here we are, coming into the Christmas season, and nothing raises my holiday spirits like the anticipated threat of Jesus coming by, kidnaping someone at work, and then breaking into my house and robbing me. Surprise! What fun that was!

And in going further, this second coming has been read, and prayed, and preached almost forever. But there is no need to fear, right? After all, the church has been preaching this surprise felony threat of Jesus for all that time and, as one commentator put it, "Jesus has not gotten so much as a speeding ticket" in over 2,000 years. So, it hardly begs to be mentioned as to how much harder, almost impossible, it is for us..today in 2016..to keep awake, and be ready.

Ready for what? What is Advent to us, here and now?

Our world is still waiting on the promised peace. Advent is the perpetuation of a promise that remains unfulfilled. I know it seems like a threat and not a promise in this gospel text, but the central thrust of the liturgical season is the expectation of the fulfillment of God's promise of the coming of Messiah....again.

Advent is two things. First, It is the celebration of the fulfillment of God's Older Testament promise of Messiah. Second, it is the anticipation of the fulfillment of the New Testament's promise that Jesus the Messiah will come again to complete the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

But why does he need to come again? Why did the lion not lie down with the lamb the first time? All the Isaiah and Gospel texts for Advent promise a time when all nations will be at peace, the lion will lay down with the lamb, swords will be beaten into plow shares and this will all be ushered in by a little child. His followers saw their bloody, violent world the same way we see ours...no change.

Do we come to a different conclusion? Where is the promised peace? As only one among so many preachers, what do I tell you? Well, let us start by trying to understand Matthew's gospel.

Matthew has an “end-time”, or apocalyptic orientation, believing that history is divided into two age. First, there was the prior evil age that God would soon replace with a new age, often called the realm of God or the realm of heaven. The old age is marked by the presence of Satan and the demons, and by idolatry, sin, injustice, exploitation, sickness, enmity between nature and humankind, violence, and death. The new age will be characterized by the complete rule of God and the angels, and by authentic worship, forgiveness, mutual support, health, blessing between nature and humankind, and eternal life.

For Matthew, God is acting through Jesus Christ to effect the change as the bridge between the two ages. The birth, life, and resurrection are the first phase of the transformation, with the complete manifestation arriving with the second coming. However, in the meantime, Matthew’s community was living in a conflict zone between the ages. Some scholars affirm that many in Matthew’s congregation were losing confidence in the coming of the Realm. The apocalypse was delayed, and their witness was fading.

Matthew wrote to encourage them to continue, using stock apocalyptic language to say, “These signs indicate that you are living in the final chapters of history.” He underscores this by using today’s verses, in telling four interlocking parables to point the community toward Realm-like qualities of life necessary in the great transition, warning the community must “be ready.”

In this context, to “be ready” is to continue to do what Jesus taught in the Gospel of Matthew. The community is to prepare for the final advent less by doing special things and more by living and witnessing as Jesus instructed. The liturgical season of Advent is an annual reminder of the importance of faithfully doing what Jesus said.

The church and her faithful struggle with deep and difficult questions at a time when we are pushed toward the shallow and simplistic. But time is ticking. People are waiting for something....

What can we do with this message?

Well, perhaps there is something about Advent that is both literal and symbolic, communal and personal. Perhaps our trouble with the whole business of wrestling with scripture is one of our own making....how we, as educated/logical/clinical modernists living in a world capped by human achievement are not comfortable with the metaphor, the mystery, the imagination of human existence for many thousands of years. When we hear or read of the “second coming” of Jesus, we want it to be a literal event, something that CNN could cover.

But maybe it is primarily more personal than that. It is a place of tension. After all, as it is conveniently in our comfort zone as a recorded, historical event, we do proclaim that something REALLY did happen in the first Advent as a fact. Where we come to the fork on the road, away from the common narrative of history, is that what REALLY happened in that first Advent was that the birth

of that common baby had cosmic effect as no other. So, it seems that, in the further narrative as to WHY that baby had effect as no other, we are meant to proclaim that something REALLY is going to happen, the sort of something that the literal can not contain.

Perhaps it is time for us to follow in creating our own metaphor. Following Michael J. Fox in the movie theme of heading “Back to the Future”.

Perhaps we could forget the literal, CNN, hard-copy understanding of “second coming”, and yet still be waiting and clinging to the hope of Jesus’ return in community. With Jesus himself, the Greek term is parousia, which means “presence”. He who is with us now, giving us hope to cling to, to keep waiting. We want to go from Jesus was here, to Jesus is now here on a date certain, in the flesh, ready to take over all that is, seen and unseen....all the while forgetting that Jesus is here now as well in that he waits with us, suffers with us, hopes with us, and dies for us.

How does our life manifest and bear witness to the crucified and risen Christ? Before rushing to the second noel, perhaps we would do well to better appropriate the first. Maybe we have been doing too much talking lately and not enough working. Maybe the theme for Advent should be “Time is running out and we have too much work and not enough hands”. Imagine the impact of thousands of God’s children making commitments of hours per week by doing what the he did: spending time amongst the so-called dregs of society. Teaching, feeding, healing and, most of all, loving them.

We may be comfortable in our spiritual journey in this time and place to reflect that there will be no physical Jesus coming a second time...or vice versa. Either way, by being “ready” as the Gospel message proclaims for today, we can be certain that we are to be fully mindful of every moment we have.

If we spend the majority of our time worrying about tomorrow, hoping in a future rescue, depressed about our past, medicating our mind for relief...then we are missing the deep, meaningful and joyful life that Jesus was trying to show us flows from God.

Being “ready” in the words of Jesus means that we each have a limited time of awareness on this planet and the goal is to fully live into it...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.