

Advent 1 - Matthew 24 Wonder and Hope

The season of Advent usually begins with a scripture about the end of time – eschatology – framing Advent as the end of an old order and the birth of the new. Throughout Advent, we explore preparation, waiting, expectation. We sing *Prepare the Way of the Lord* each Sunday as one additional candle on the Advent wreath is lit. Mary and Joseph are travelling, heading for Bethlehem. The stable is already in place at the foot of the altar, and the animals peacefully there. I wonder whether they know that the Lord is coming soon?

Jesus' words – that the Lord will come unexpectedly, 'like a thief in the night' – may sound at first like this second coming is a coming *against*, not a *coming for* the reign of love.

The passage from Matthew 24 is not a doomsday message – far from it. Although the day and the hour when heaven and earth will pass away are unknown, there is an *always*, and *already* about the Lord's presence that flashes a bright message of hope. The Lord's coming is an ongoing event, a coming here and now, among us. And so we celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world at Christmas, every year.

Expectation and hope connect preparation – prepare the way– with *watching* for the Lord.

The people of the New Testament – the writers of the Gospels, Paul's letters and so forth, thought the end of time would come very soon. There were lots of signs, just as Jesus described – war, famine, division – our times are not too different. Still, I imagine very few of you are actually watching the horizon for Christ to come again in glory, words we use in our Creed.

We spend little of our time contemplating *when* the end of time will become *now*.

And for good reason. If we get worked up about *when* the end of time is coming – wondering whether it is just around the corner – we risk losing our focus on the fact that here and now there are people who are homeless, going hungry, sick people who need looking after. We forget to *live* in the now. We can't help build the kingdom of God by ignoring the world around us.

Moreover, it's been two thousand years. We have lost the vision of hope that the expectation of a second coming, soon, offered those living in the first and second century.

I wonder whether some of those who reject religion today and live wholly in the secular, have concluded that either God forgot, or there never was a God at all.

Pew Research Center polling chronicles the surge in millennial Americans (born 1981 to 1996) who now identify as atheists, agnostics or nothing in particular when asked about religion. In a 1919 update, Pew noted that 40% of the millennials are "nones", that is, claim no affiliation whatsoever. Many of these millennials are already the parents of another generation, and the

“nones” among them do little if anything to *prepare the way* for their children’s spiritual life.

Well, those children are our grandchildren. What does preparing the way look like? What should or could we do? I am concerned about that. To me, it is a much more important issue than declining church attendance, a largely institutional concern.

The experiences and beliefs of ancient peoples prepared the way for Christianity. Rev. Dr. Bradley Hauff – a member of the Presiding Bishop’s staff, and member of the Oglala Sioux or Lakota – says the Lakota were prepared for Christianity, because the Lakota tradition already had a vision of a messiah-like figure, who would come to earth bringing peace and light.

Fr. Dale Johnson, leading our current Sunday Faith Formation class, says that Zoroastrianism (think, the Magi or wisemen of Matthew’s Gospel) had a trinitarian concept of God, a dual cosmology of good and evil, and eschatology predicting the conquest of evil. They were open – spiritually prepared for Christ.

Judaism carries the seeds of Christianity in monotheism and the expectation of a messiah who would come to save.

Preparing the way is about teaching how to wonder, to imagine, something greater than we are – to explore a deeper pondering about our common center – what Isaiah calls ‘the instruction of God.’ If there is God, what is God like? Who is God? Where is God? How do evil and good exist together?

My daughter was raised as an Episcopalian, her husband is Jewish. They share the holiday traditions of both faiths, attend neither church nor synagogue; they expect their children to decide for themselves if and when they are interested in religion. This fall presented an opportunity for exploration. My granddaughter Grace, age 13 and her brother Max, age 15, began attending a private school in September, when the family moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Grace and Max asked to try the faith education classes.

Listen to what happened. On the first day of Grace’s class, the teacher asked the young people to make a list of the good things that God has done for them. Grace’s piece of paper remained empty, and near the end of the class period, the teacher asked her why? *I don’t believe in God*, Grace responded. Well, *just make something up*, her teacher unhelpfully suggested. Grace received a C on her blank paper.

In Max’s class, the topic was the creation stories in Genesis. Max saw a problem because if the creation stories were true, the carnivorous dinosaurs would have eaten all the people. The teacher reported Max as disruptive in class. Marks for detention.

Hear the missed opportunities to prepare the way of the Lord, to lay the groundwork for spiritual life in those two young people – indeed in the whole classes of students! How easy it would have

been for that teacher to invite wondering, rather than disciplining an unexpected response.

To Grace – Would life be different if there were God? I know something of the sort of things that trouble Grace. If there were God, Maria's son wouldn't have died in an auto accident; Julia's brother would not have killed himself. If the God Grace could believe in existed, bad things wouldn't happen. Grace is on her journey to faith – and there is a lot to talk about, to prepare the way for her spiritual awakening. She already holds the notion that God is good, that God brings good to the world. In her youthful experience, there is an unresolvable contradiction.

I want to wonder with her further. Is there anything greater than self? Do the sorrows and joys of life fit into a greater context? Why are love and life given to us? Towards what end, what goal, does our life journey move? How are we part of that? I wonder. Grace is open to wonder, if someone wonders with her and respects her responses.

To Max, I would say. Remember when you were little, and you asked me to read the same book every night when I visited? *Goodnight Moon*. The stuffed bunny was tucked in bed, and before he went to sleep he said goodnight to all the beloved things around him – to mittens and kittens, to socks and clocks. Not a true story – there really wasn't a bunny who did that – and yet it is true, that the reassurance the bunny craved was that all those things he loved would still be there in the morning. . Millions of children have been soothed in the comfort of that expectation, that hope. The book had a message that Max loved. The stories in Genesis are a bit like that – they have truth to tell us. What's the truth of Adam and Eve? Of Noah and the Ark? I wonder, don't you?

Prepare the Way. Prepare the way — to walk in the light of the Lord.

In the days to come, Isaiah says, all people will go to the Mountain of the Lord's house, seeking instruction: How to beat swords into plough shares, spears into pruning-hooks... how to not learn war anymore. We need to learn the Lord's ways, and to unlearn our ways of violence, to walk in the Light of the Lord.

Isaiah's gleaming promise, the transformational image of all people seeking the Lord's instruction, is carried forward in the psalm. The psalmist sees peace in a world ordered according to God's purposes. The apostle Paul urges that it is time to wake up, time to move into the vision that God has promised.

Our childhood wondering is wasted on gifts from Santa, when our human yearning is so strong and profound.

Where is the hope? How will our children and our children's children be part of Isaiah's vision that we all seek God together? Sadly, I will not see Grace and Max this holiday season. My hope is to prod their parents into some of that wondering discussion as they celebrate Christmas and Hanuka.

Jesus says, ‘you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.’ Suppose, just suppose, Jesus is not talking about the end of the world whenever, wherever.

What if Jesus is saying that there comes a time in all of our lives when something will test us deeply, demand us to come to terms with it, force us to be accountable about who and what we are. Something that will turn us to inquire what we really do believe.

Suppose that is what Jesus is saying. Keep awake spiritually, be spiritually ready.

Prepare the way. Take the first wondering steps about God, wondering why bad things happen or how the world and life were created. Wonder, even if you are worn down by a life that has left you feeling isolated, small and insignificant, or alone.

Be wide awake, be ready and open for God, whatever happens next.

Maybe there *will be* a great cataclysm, a great judgment. Maybe, one by one, we will meet God as our life journey comes to an end.

Either way, our lives are in God’s hands. Our time is now, we must live the now. With compassion, with love, with hope. And with wonder.

As we enter into the preparation and the hope of Advent, let us share our wonder with our children, and our children’s children – and each other.

Amen

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
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