

Advent I 2019

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life ...

These words from the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent speak to us of the urgency that should mark our faith and life at this special time of the year. The prayer encourages us to have an Advent emphasis and not get lost in all that is happening in the secular Christmas season. This prayer also encourages us to stay alert and avoid drifting into a kind of spiritual hibernation.

Wake up, Matthew tells us, like a school teacher in a hot, stuffy room.

This is the First Sunday of the Advent season, a time of preparation, expectation and hope. But what are we getting ready for? What do we expect will happen?

Are we thinking about the end of the world or are we simply wondering how we will get through the next four weeks?

Are we happily anticipating the Birth of Christ, the Prince of Peace or are we preparing for excessive shopping, the predictable economic disaster of December and all the other craziness that can take over our lives at this time of year?

Advent urges us to create something of a neutral zone in the midst of all the excessive activities associated with commercial Christmas in our world. Our readings for today call us to a time of thoughtful waiting. The prophet Isaiah encourages us to learn God's plan for our lives and to work for peace in the world. The Epistle tells us to be vigilant and to live honorable lives that avoid the excesses that diminish us and harm others.

But it is our Gospel reading that merits our greatest attention. Matthew 24 presents four points, each reminding us of the uncertainty of life and the need for us to be alert. A few verses prior to our Gospel reading Matthew has Jesus say, the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Matthew gives us a spectacular image of the Risen Christ riding a cloud to enter into our world a second time. This is a reminder that ultimately the future is in God's hands.

These four points in Matthew 24 are dramatic and compelling, because they speak about people and unexpected occurrences. The first point refers to Noah and the flood story from Genesis. We know the story, but it is never

anyone's first choice. It tells us of a time when God was so angry with the thoughtless, immoral actions of the people he created that he destroyed the world except for Noah and his family.

The next two points are similar. Putting it very bluntly, one sentence for each example, Jesus presents two pairs of people, working at normal tasks – one pair working in the fields, the other grinding meal. One from each of these pairs is received into God's new order, the other is left behind. This is not as terrible as perishing in a flood, but still these points are alarming. They remind us that God will make a decision ultimately about who is included and who is separated. We know that God is reaching out to all people with grace and power, but we also know that some accept God's love while others reject it. Our Gospel reminds us this morning that decisions will have ultimate consequences.

The last point is equally disturbing. Jesus likens God breaking into our world to the experience of a thief, breaking into a house.

On one level, these stories seem like the last thing we want to hear at a time when all around us the society is gearing up for jingle bells, twinkling trees, and jolly old Santa Claus. Who wants to hear stories about people destroyed in flash floods, people being forever separated from God.

But perhaps that is the very reason we need to hear these stories right now. For the danger of Christmas is that we can all too easily blend ourselves in with everyone else ... rushing to buy the perfect gifts or ordering them on line, cooking and baking the things that Christmas requires, sending out cards and letters to people we have not thought about since last Christmas. No wonder Christmas becomes, for many, the most unhappy time of the year! Lonely people are always lonelier at Christmas making the holiday a most painful time.

If we wake up, as Matthew advises, perhaps Advent will be more meaningful.

In his poem, Advent Calendar, Rohan Williams wrote;

*He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.*

*He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself*

*arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.*

*He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.*

*He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.*

Rowan Williams

That child is Jesus and he is what Advent is all about.

Amen.