

Sermon on Matthew 24:36-44
First Sunday in Advent, November 27, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

We Americans are known to be an impatient people. We have a hard time waiting for things, even when they are worth waiting for. I know, I'm one of them. We just had a Thanksgiving holiday, which wasn't so bad, because we could wake up in the morning, put a turkey in the oven, and eat by noon....or so. That's not bad. A lot of work, but the reward comes on the very same day. Other things are harder. Like children waiting for Christmas, and Santa Claus to come. So within hours of celebrating Thanksgiving, and being thankful for all the blessings and good food that God has given us (or we have received in community and in our families), people line up outside of stores in our many outlet malls and step over each other to get to the merchandize! I saw an amusing video of this, which said, *Black Friday: Because only in America do people trample each other just one day after being thankful for what they already have!* I know. It wasn't you. It wasn't me, either. But the point is, we humans just can't wait for a deal, and will often fight each other to get it....especially we Americans, who "invented" fast food! And wait for hours in long lines to get it! Amen?

Just about three weeks ago, we Americans participated in our national political pastime which takes place every four years: we voted for President and many other candidates, national and local. We obsessed over the campaign for almost two years, which all culminated on Tuesday, November 8. The next morning, most of the nation woke up shocked at the result, the election of a man, who has been a familiar household name for decades because of tabloid news and tv, but never held public office. Since that day, half the nation has looked forward to Inauguration Day on January 20, 2017 with excitement and anticipation, and the other half with fear and dread of the coming apocalypse. We have two more months to wait and see what Inauguration Day will bring us, or two months to gear up for the resistance. Either way, it will be hard to wait. We're not good at that. But at least we know the exact time and date of this new day.

The gospel today speaks of something much less certain – the coming of the Son of Man (according to Matthew) in the clouds. Last week we observed "Christ the King" Sunday, the final Sunday in the church year, when scripture says "*the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*" This is from the 24th chapter of Matthew, verse 29-30.

Well, it has been a week, and nothing has happened yet. In fact, it has been 2000 years since the first century when Matthew first wrote these words, and still, the Son of Man – whom we equate with Jesus Christ, our risen and ascended Lord – has not come. Some scholars say that this is why Matthew wrote his gospel! Matthew described Jesus throughout the gospel as the fulfillment of the expectations of the Jewish people for a Messiah to come – the anointed one of God who would save God’s people from their oppressors (who at that time were the Romans). This book, written toward the end of the first century, came about at the time when the apostles had been killed and their descendents were dying out. The people of the church of Matthew were perhaps becoming impatient and discouraged at the prospects of Jesus ever coming again and their hopes being fulfilled. When would the Messiah come? Who knows? Maybe they asked whether any of it were true? What were they waiting for, and for how long? This would be especially hard, in the generation after the Fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., with Jews and Christians dispersed throughout the Roman Empire as refugees and slaves. Actually, only a small, hungry, struggling Christian community remained in the ruins of Jerusalem.

In answer to this, Matthew takes great care to emphasize this message in his gospel about the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: **stay awake, be prepared, and wait with anticipation for Jesus’ return!** For if we don’t, we might miss out on God’s advent – his coming - among us, which will happen when Jesus comes again. So whatever you do, stay awake! Except for this: we just don’t know when. We do not know the day or the time of Jesus’ return, we just have to be patient, watch, and wait.

So what did Jesus tell his followers to do, as they waited for him (when he taught them, just before his arrest and crucifixion). He gave a few illustrations and examples in the gospel passage read today. He said to look at the fig tree, for example, a common fruit tree in Palestine. When you see its branches get tender and put out leaves, you know that summer is near. (Just like you and I watch buds popping out on trees in the spring every year, we know that summer is coming soon. And we know that when the leaves turn color and fall off the trees every fall, we know that winter is near.) So, just like this, you will know there are signs of Christ’s return, when you see the sun darkened, the moon without light, and stars falling from heaven. Just as we sing in the spiritual, *My Lord, What a Morning*. Which means we look on such signs with dread, or with great hope!

Jesus also made a comparison with another ancient, mythical era, which we should NOT imitate – although I’m afraid we might be. Just as in the days of Noah before the great Flood, people were eating and drinking, and getting married oblivious that anything bad was about to happen, even as Noah built his ark. They knew nothing – or saw nothing amiss – until the flood came and swept them all

away. Jesus also made examples of two women in the field working at harvest – one would be taken away and one would remain. Or while grinding wheat, one would be taken away and one would remain. What was THAT all about? Was this a precursor to the *Left Behind* movie series, about the Rapture? I don't think so, but who knows? But the message is, KEEP AWAKE!

And finally, one more illustration of what Jesus meant. It's like the owner of a house – if he or she knew when a thief was coming, they might be extra alert, double lock the doors, call the police, and have the dogs ready. But who ever knows when an unexpected guest is coming, friendly or not? A knock at the door at midnight, who could it be? *Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour!*

So, who or what are you waiting for? I hope you aren't *Waiting for Godot!* This is a 20th century play by Samuel Beckett, a tragicomedy in which two tramps wait for someone who never arrives, a play without action - only conversation, except for other characters who happen by. I HOPE that's not for whom we wait! However, our lives are filled with uncertainty, often interrupted by unwelcome surprises, even more than good news. The Chicago Cubs play baseball for over a century without reward, until they finally get to the World Series in 2016 – and win! Two friends work side by side – one stays healthy, the other learns he has cancer. Two persons equally qualified apply for a job – one gets it, the other doesn't. Two persons watch and wait for God to appear – one never sees any evidence of God's work, the other sees God's hands in everything that happens around his or her life. So, you've got to stay awake, or you'll never see the surprises – and you will just remain disappointed by unfulfilled expectations! It just goes to show how difficult watching and waiting is! When we look, we may not see. We can only hope to be awake to see the surprises!

Maybe that's why we come to worship on Sundays – because we have been patiently waiting to see God and experience the presence of Christ, in a world where it is so difficult to see the evidence of God anywhere! When the democratic process disappoints or fails us; when there is so much senseless violence in our world; when hospitals are bombed in Aleppo, and children are killed; when Native Americans aren't consulted as oil pipelines are planned and built on sacred ground, and are arrested or beaten by police when they object; when some lose their health insurance or their jobs while others live lives of luxury; when people are elected to public office who seem unqualified or the process appears unjust – where is God in the midst of all of this?

So Jesus says, regardless of all this uncertainty, keep awake, because God is coming – it will soon be apparent in the skies! But also, don't you know, that God is already here and present and among us, through God's Son? Jesus is here in the bread and the wine; Jesus is here in a kind word of forgiveness and reconciliation

among enemies; Jesus is here in acts of love for neighbor, for a refugee, for an immigrant, for a Muslim (or a Muslim for a Christian or a Jew).

The good news of Jesus is to keep awake and look for God WHO IS ALREADY HERE, and among us – even when we think we cannot see God! This is why we come to worship, by the way, to be encouraged by one another in this community of faith, in the goodness of God, God's mercy, and God's presence. It's to hear the testimony of the scriptures about a God who is very much here, showing unconditional love and mercy for human beings through all generations, and for you and me today. We gather for the mutual comfort and consolation of the faithful, who have not given up – when some already have.

So, are you ready for this? Are you ready to take that risk of faith that says, I believe in the presence of God, in God's mercy and love for all God's children? Are you and I willing to stand up and be counted as those who still believe this, who are willing to be counted as faithful, who seek to repent – and be changed, transformed by the gospel? Are you and I ready to love one another, to love God and neighbor as ourselves? To stop being silent when we see injustice? For there is an accounting coming up for us in days ahead, to be counted as standing for our neighbors when some want to arrest and deport them, to neglect or imprison them. The stakes are getting higher every day – all the signs are pointing to this! It won't be a rapture, but it will be a testing for Christians.

So get ready! Keep awake, and stay alert. For God is with us, our risen Lord Jesus Christ is present among us, and days are coming that will test our faith and our love. I hope, trust and pray that we will all be ready.