

## 1 Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

Nov. 29, 2016

*Our business with God*

I have never been one to watch Thanksgiving Day parades – these have always seemed to be mostly commercialism and not much about thanks – Santa & Christmas coopted as symbols of profit and retail business. This year I was up at 5:30 a.m. to watch the Philadelphia Thanksgiving Day parade (at 96 years, the oldest of the parades), because my ten year old granddaughter Grace was one of the several hundred dancers invited to participate. With the marching bands, the floats, the celebrity performers, there was an extravagant cast of a thousand or more. Grace's dance troupe kicked off the parade.

Eight girls (ages 10 to 17) ran into the street in Santa-evoking short red dresses with red hats banded in white fur. It was cold, maybe 30 degrees. The music began, a Matt Redman lyric – “*Come and see, come and see what God has done.*” It was a totally unexpected connection to Christmas, the invitation of Advent to prepare the way.

Come and see, come and see what God has done  
Come and see, come and see what love has won  
in this place hearts and lives waking up  
to the Light of the World.

Advent begins today – abruptly disrupting the lengthy Church season called ‘ordinary time’, that time between Pentecost and Advent. We might disagree whether these last few months have been *ordinary* at all – with distant war, race motivated killings, hate crimes, misogynist slogans, massacres – and election results that few anticipated. Sadly, since the election, we seem to be settling into our current reality of escalating violence, intolerance and disrespect. So much so that we are dangerously close to accepting it as normative, or the new normal for how we relate to each other.

How many of you made a conscious decision not to discuss political issues at the Thanksgiving table because you knew there would be bitter argument and dissension if you did?

Advent. We are invited to come and see what God has done. To set aside, for this time, what *we* have done – or not done — with God's gifts. We are invited to look at the future with new eyes.

A few weeks ago, I spoke after the service with one of our guests, visiting from out of town. He said he enjoyed our church ‘because the people seemed so connected.’ He added he regularly attended a large church where people didn't really know each other. “There,’ he said, ‘you just go in, do your business with God, and leave”.

I have thought a lot about what ‘doing business with God’ might be. Methodical duty? A commercialized vision of God for profit that sacrifices other values? Buying and selling God?

Is faith itself some sort of a transaction?

As a teenager, perhaps you offered God a bargain like, *'if I win this swim race (or get an "A" on this book report), I will go to church on Sunday.'* I've known adults who offered bargains like, *'if I don't have cancer, I will go to mass every day for the rest of my life.'*

It's easy to slip into thinking of our relationship with God as transactional – if I am very good, then I will be blessed with riches. Prosperity gospel. If I do good works, then I will receive God's grace. I have to earn the stars for my crown in heaven. There is really big transaction concept hidden in atonement theology – but that's a much longer sermon.

*If I, then God will.... Or, if God does, then I will.*

Personally, I think that is bad theology. We receive God's grace. It's God's gift. We are blessed, abundantly. It's God's gift. We will win, or we will lose the swim race. Our talents are God's gifts; it's up to us to use them, or not. Life is God's gift. There are no business deals to be made here.

We have a baptismal covenant. *Covenant* does not mean contract: if I give you \$20,000 then you give me the keys and the car. *Covenant* in Scripture is about relationship promises, not if-then business transactions.

God's rainbow covenant is the promise to Noah that God will never again destroy all humankind. God's covenant promise to Abraham is that he will lead a great people, and the land from *'the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,'* will be the land of Abraham's descendants. Gen. 15. Speaking through Jeremiah, God promises a new covenant, that God will pardon and make all things new (Jer. 31). Jesus teaches his disciples about *'the new covenant,'* a renewed relationship with God, in which everyone will know God equally, in which God forgives all. Luke 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25.

Promises of relationship, not business transactions.

Our Advent begins with God's promise of incarnation and the invitation,

*Come and see what God has done.*

Look at the words of Isaiah. God is judge and creator of all that is. The people of God in ancient Israel lived during constant wars. Isaiah prophesied about a dream, God's dream, for a world in which people would trust God and not violence; a world in which war as a national policy would no longer be needed. Swords into ploughshares.

We hear today's passage from Isaiah as strongly embedded in the Christian hope for a better world. In Advent, we tend to get tied up in visions of the baby in the manger, this baby who was expected to become the prince of peace, the savior of his people.

Listen again. The Scripture tells us what God has done. Jesus has *already* come. The royal city of Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt many times since the prophet Isaiah spoke in approximately 670 BCE.

Jesus' apocalyptic words in Matthew warn of a sudden, unexpected act of God. We think of the incarnation. Jesus talks about the second coming. We recite in the Creed, "he will come again, to judge the living and the dead." Advent is as much about that second coming as it is about the first. What God has already done, *and* the unexpected yet to come. Two great themes of Advent. How are we to prepare?

Jesus says some will be left behind, and some will be taken away. Who is who? Are the ones snatched up taken away for judgment or to be saved?

The people of Noah's day were doing what they ordinarily did, marrying, having children, eating, drinking, playing, but, God saw that '*the earth is filled with violence.*' Gen. 6-7. Noah was instructed to build the ark – Noah was just an ordinary man with wife and children. Was Noah was 'left behind' to survive the flood on a mountaintop, or were those who perished in the flood the ones who were left behind?

The point is to live every day as if today is *the* day. Live honorably, for yes, the Lord is coming back and he will likely not be pleased with everything he finds. Prepare for the coming of Christ – but know that He will come in God's own time, and *that* cannot be predicted.

Our ordinary lives continue. Preparation for the coming of the Lord – our Advent– takes place in our daily dying and rising, living out our baptism and faith in this world.

Advent offers a fresh start, like God to Noah. Advent is also the challenge of continuing to live our ordinary, everyday lives. Can we trust in the future without controlling, or even knowing the details of what is to come? Prepare the Way of the Lord, indeed.

Looking back on what God has done for us, we can have confidence in what God will do. Through the incarnation, God reveals enough for us to imagine a different world. We have more than hope, we have real possibilities.

Still, the unexpected looms over our lives. We cannot postpone our commitments to be the persons we aspire to be, to live out of our covenant relationship with God. Keep awake *spiritually*, and be *spiritually* ready. Prepare the Way.

So it is with Advent. We lean forward in anticipation to this time of peace described in Isaiah. We look for a fresh start – a 'wake up call' – from our acceptance of the status quo. *Sleepers awake!* Prepare the Way.

Keep awake to the needs of others. Pray for those children who are being verbally and

physically assaulted on playgrounds because they are the children of immigrants or people of color. Live a God-filled life, not just one in which we invite God in once in a while. Live a life in the context of this God who has done great things.

What if our business with God is to question, to stand up when others would sit down, to challenge the status quo rather than accept it, and to ask God, what can I do today to help make the glorious dream of peace and plenty the reality in *all* of our lives?

Here is another ‘what if.’ Suppose Jesus is not talking about the second coming, or the end of the world.

What if Jesus is saying that to all of us, something will come into our lives unexpectedly, something that tests us deeply and forces us to come to terms with it, forces us to be accountable for who we are and for what we have? Something that will require us to look at and return to what we really believe. Something that will require God’s grace if we are to adequately respond. What if that is what today’s passage from Matthew is about? \*[interpretation suggested by Herbert O’Driscoll]

The unexpected loss of a youthful parent or sibling; a fire or flood destroying home and possessions; a disease or injury that changes our expectations of self. Unexpected things that challenge our very identity even as they call us to account.

Perhaps this last election cycle is just such an event for our nation. What do we believe about this country? How are we accountable for where we are now, and for what we have or do not have? For what serves, and what does not serve, the common good? What calls us to return to older ways, and what calls us to new vision?

Let us change the narrative, not by seeking power but by risking ourselves for what we believe in. Let’s make *that* our business with God. Prepare the Way.

Amen.

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