

Awake!

Matthew 24:36-44; Isaiah 2:1-5

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

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The setting of our gospel today is a few days after Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. An event we normally celebrate on Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. One of the interesting features of the First Sunday of Advent is that the gospel lesson comes from Holy Week.

During his final week Jesus would teach in the temple, and then he and the disciples would walk back to Bethany by crossing the Mount of Olives, which gave them a great view of the Temple. I've stood on the Mount of Olives and looked out over the Old City of Jerusalem. It is a spectacular experience and something you should do in your life, if you get the opportunity.

Leaving the city gate, they would have traveled through the valley between the temple mount and the Mount of Olives, a valley which was then, and is now, a graveyard, filled with monuments to the dead. The creek that runs in the bottom of that valley was then, and is now, a part of the sewer of the city of Jerusalem. So, on the one hand you get the beautiful vistas of the old city, and on the other hand these reminders of death and decay.

One day, as they left the temple and were traveling back to Bethany over the Mount of Olives, the disciples were marveling at the sacred buildings. Jesus then said "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Sitting down there on the Mount, the disciples had questions about what Jesus said. They asked, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

A sign, you see, would give them clarity and maybe some certainty. It's something to hang their hats on. Something to plan for. Without a sign, all they would have would be their expectation and anticipation. A sign makes it easier to wait and prepare.

We want to know the future. We want to be prepared for what might happen. We don't like chance.

Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked*, from which the Broadway musical is adapted, addresses the human desire to know the future.

The novel is a re-telling of the Wizard of Oz story from the point-of-view of the Wicked Witch, who is not that wicked in this particular telling of the story.

It opens with the witch's parents on the day of her birth. Her father, Frex, is a minister in the established church. He is upset about the appearance in town of a new religious sect. This new sect makes use of a device that they call the Clock of the Time Dragon to predict the

future. This particular religious sect engages in sensationalism and dramatic signs to arouse the people's passions. It is this which Frex does not like.

In the village he confronts the clock. The villagers don't want to hear Frex' objections to the clock, they want to see it work. Before the new sect demonstrates the clock's power, they proclaim the following:

All our lives are activity without meaning; we burrow ratlike into life and we squirm ratlike through it and ratlike we are flung into our graves at the end. Now and then, why shouldn't we hear a voice of prophecy, or see a miracle play? Beneath the apparent sham and indignity of our ratlike lives, a humble pattern and meaning still applies! Come nearer, my good people, and watch what a little extra knowledge augurs for your lives! The Time Dragon sees before and beyond and within the truth of your sorry span of years here! Look at what it shows you!

The time clock then marvels them with revelations about members of the community, revelations that create discord and distrust among the people. It is the appearance of the time clock, then, which seems to lay the groundwork for everything else that follows in the story – violence, political oppression, war, drought and famine, confusion. The villagers desire to know the future, but this very desire seems to give birth to the troubles that come.

The disciples, like the villagers of Oz, wanted to know what was coming. It's not a bad thing that the disciples asked. It is not bad to want knowledge, to want a sign. This isn't a weakness of the disciples. But, at the same time, Jesus doesn't really give them an answer to their question

Instead, he begins a lengthy sermon of which our gospel passage today is only one small part. His answer, his lengthy sermon, is filled with mysterious, apocalyptic language. For example, Jesus says things like,

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel, then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath.

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Sovereign is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

Well, for two thousand years people have been trying to decode this sermon and all of its mysterious and apocalyptic language. What does the fig tree stand for and what is its relationship to the abomination of desolation? And speaking of the “desolating sacrilege,” what is that exactly? Which wars and rumors of wars are we talking about, because there have been plenty of those? There are lots of preachers on tv who will tell you that they know exactly what this sermon means. That they know exactly what’s going to happen at the end of the world. In fact, they’ve made an entire industry out of it.

Yet, there’s something odd about this industry of predicting the future, because, as read in today’s gospel Jesus says,

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Creator. . . Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

According to the Bible, then, the end is something that even Jesus doesn’t know. Something he didn’t need to know in order to carry out his ministry. And I think that that’s important to realize, because otherwise we might be confused. How are we to be awake and make ready if we don’t know what’s coming? Well, if Jesus didn’t know and didn’t need to know when the end would come, then why do we?

I think *not knowing* was part of the point Jesus was trying to make. Jesus didn’t really answer the disciples’ questions about when the end would come and what the sign would be, because if we really understand Jesus and his ministry, then those questions don’t even arise. What Jesus wants us to be awake and prepared for is something else entirely.

First off, Jesus has to deconstruct the disciples understanding of “the end.” And I imagine our understanding needs a little deconstruction as well.

The disciples seem to be talking about a supposed end of human history when God would come in judgment and usher in the reign of God. And, it’s fitting that they have this conversation on the Mount of Olives, because Jewish folklore told that it was at this very place that God would return. The masses would be assembled and God would judge them, with the wicked being cast down into the valley below. Remember, the valley where the sewers run.

So, it is in this setting where the disciples suppose this end-times judgment will occur that Jesus debunks what they are expecting for the end. What he tells them is that the end is already here, that it is happening right now.

The sign they are looking for is Jesus himself. Stanley Hauerwas, the Methodist theologian, has an exciting interpretation of Jesus' sermon. Hauerwas claims that all the mysterious, apocalyptic language that Jesus is using is a reference to his own crucifixion that is just days away. In fact, if you look ahead to Matthew, chapter 26, verse 2, you see that the final line of Jesus' sermon is this:

You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.

According to Hauerwas, the abomination of desolation Jesus speaks about is the crucifixion. The "sign of the Son of Man" appearing in the heavens is Jesus raised up on the cross. The great suffering to be endured is the suffering that Jesus will experience. The end of the world as we know it, then, will occur when Jesus dies and rises again.

So, if all of this is true, then you and I already live after the end. From here on out, the story we are part of is open-ended. But then what are we to be awake and alert for? How are we to prepare for the appearance of the Christ?

I believe the answer is in the many stories that Jesus tells as part of this sermon. Here is one of them:

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?"

Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

I believe that the point of this parable is that we need to be awake and alert for the Christ to surprise us by appearing in the guise of other people we encounter in every day of our lives.

In other words, the kingdom is present among us. All these things that are hoped for have come to pass. The reign of God breaks into human history when the church feeds the hungry, cures the sick, clothes the naked, and ministers to the imprisoned. God comes not in some catastrophic moment at the end of history. God already came. God is already here. God is in our every act of mercy and compassion.

This, then, is the purpose of our Advent waiting. To prepare ourselves to experience Christ as physically present . . . among us . . . here . . . in Omaha and Council Bluffs . . . in 2010.