

Advent 1A Isaiah 2:1-5 Romans 13:11-14 Matthew 24:36-44 Psalm 122

The houselights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise.

In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has the baton. In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself.

You hold your breath to listen.

The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.

We are here again, on the First Sunday of Advent, and again, at the beginning of the church year we start with the end of all things, the return of Christ in fulfillment of God's fullest embrace of God's world.

Together we acknowledge it at every Eucharist as we acclaim "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

Likewise in the Nicene Creed we say: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

Our Gospel for today sets the tone for the new church year: "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Christ has been coming back for so long that many if not most people have given up

the hope, deciding I suppose, not to lose any sleep over it. I won't be blaming them for that.

Jesus told his disciples not to make any long-range plans because he was coming right back.

Paul wrote to the churches as if the Lord's return was just around the corner.

Years went by and those who knew Jesus died.

Very soon it was only those who knew those who knew Jesus that were left, and who then decided that they better get down on parchment what they were told before their memories failed.

And we are certainly glad they decided to do that.

Our best guess is that Matthew's Gospel was the second or third one written, maybe forty years after the death of Jesus; Mary was more than likely dead, also Peter and Paul; Jerusalem and the Temple were reduced to piles of stone, and the chosen people were suffering.

Matthew was indeed a clever writer. He had to turn to some different angle to make some sense of the way things were going. He had a bit of explaining to do.

He had to do more than his original purpose called for, which was to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

People were frightened, anxious, and tried of waiting. Was this God's true intention? Had they been misled? How could they hang on to the hope?

And so Matthew and his community framed what we know as the 24th chapter – Matthew's answer to these questions – often referred to as “the little apocalypse.”

However, his answer sets up a perplexing paradox by giving us Jesus' sayings about the end time in the verses immediately preceding our lesson, together with Matthew's own twist.

First, Jesus says “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” And then according to Matthew Jesus said, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

What could Matthew do but to put these two statements together, to rub against each other for all these centuries, as if Jesus was saying “I'm coming back, but God only knows when?”

But in the meanwhile, “Keep awake for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming!”

That definitely has not stopped the seemingly endless speculation, the wrong guesses by self-appointed prophets, which seem to increase whenever some real life portend appears on the horizon.

Of course, what is humorous about all those absolute convictions about the return of Christ is that the so-called prophets are saying that will happen when folks are wide-awake with eyes fully open and completely ready, as if God uses the same version of Google calendar as they do.

Would Monday be okay? Saturday afternoon better?

That is certainly not going to happen, and neither is a published schedule for the return of Jesus, creating some kind of photo-op.

No, following Matthew, it is more like Christ's return will resemble a thief in the night, face covered and hood pulled over his head.

If you have ever had your home invaded, or the stereo gone and the side window open, or even heard of someone who has, then you know what a disturbing image of God this is.

God as intruder!

As we know, to have your home, your most private and supposedly secure space invaded is to feel broken-into at some deep level of your own being. According to Matthew this invader is a thief, not a murderer. But that does not help very much. You still can feel watched, cased-out as it were, your security system hacked, as if you have shown the thief the way in.

The key question here is, **what is this One after?** If he is the One Matthew is talking about, he is not interested in your new watch or digital camera.

Zero interest in your paltry possessions.

He is interested in you and in me. But apparently not the 'you' that others meet during your daytime routines of child-care, family relating, work, answering email, the stop at the cleaners or the bank or Trader Joe's.

This One's interest is in the you that is finished with all of that – the making of dinner, checking the answering machine, the you after you let out the cat and have turned out the lights, and the house is silent around you.

This is when you should keep one ear cocked in expectation of the One who wants to come to you. Now are the moments when this intruder is **most** interested in you – when you seem sure that no one is focused on you, no one watching you, when you assume you are alone.

Otherwise – if you were expecting this One – he would not show up. However, given that all you are counting on is a good night's sleep, it is the best time for this One to disarm the sensors of your personal security system, and to enter your previously safe space.

Now why in the world would a loving Christ do that?

I think that we know why.

Because you are otherwise, most of the time, so very well protected.

Because it may be the only time when our guard is down.

It takes practice, but you and I have become rather good at keeping most everything that is unfamiliar at a comfortable distance while awake – to avoid as much as possible experiences that are unsettling and jarring, that adjust our equilibrium.

But an expert thief knows that you have to sleep, so she waits until after dark
- comes when you do not expect.

And just maybe this One knows how much your lives need to be broken into
and how strongly we might resist.

This thief is different. Yes, he is looking for your valuables, but he actually knows what they are: not your silver and your flat screen TV, but the seat of your passions, your longings, your heart, your mind, your inner spirit, your
life energy.

That is what this thief is passionate for. They are the treasures of her heart.
And she is set on them.

There would be safer ways for this thief to come – by some kind of advanced notice, informing you that your prayers have been answered and the
kingdom will come three days hence at 5pm.

So therefore you will no longer have use for any of those things that you so tightly protect. You can let them go, as you will have no need of them. Your list of important things, your consuming plans, and your carefully guarded self: next Wednesday at 5 none of that will matter anymore.

How would you react? I think you have about as good a guess about your reaction as I do about mine.

I am extremely busy, have hardly settled into my new home. I am planning my retirement.

I just bought season tickets for the Newman Center concerts. I have not finished my advanced degree.

I only have one grandchild and the second one is on the way.

I need more time to put my affairs in order.

I need to explain myself to some people first – to put some things back together. At least give me time to wash the sheets!

“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.”

Here is the reason why God does not send an email or a tweet.

Here is the reason why God comes to us like a thief in the night.

So that we do not have a chance to lock God out. For if we are successful at that we will never come to realize what kind of a strange thief this is.

One who comes to not to **take** but to **give**.

Not One who comes to bind us, **but to set us free**.

And if we could for once overcome our fear of God's intrusion – to let this intruder in to do what this One is really determined to do – then we might find God placing in **our hands** the valuables of God's heart: His bottomless and transforming love, rather than stealing the meager valuables that pre-occupy our attention and protect so anxiously.

So – the real threat is not outside the door. It is inside us – inside of our misguided defenses and excuses and hesitations and doubts. Which of us knows when and how God will find a way into our hearts during the stillness and wonders of this Advent and Christmastide?

Advent is here. Hear the sound of the silence. Keep awake, therefore – not to keep this One out - but to let in the One who comes to set us free!
Truly, this is an extraordinary moment!