



From the Pulpit: November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Matthew 24:3—44 selected verses

In the Meantime, I: The Already and The Not Yet

This Advent at Kenilworth Union Church, Katie and I want to preach this sermon series called “In the Meantime.” We’re going to be using the common lectionary passages and for the first Sunday of Advent the lectionary suggests a passage from Matthew 24.

stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus answered them, “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

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People are fascinated by the end of the world. This is true inside the Christian Church and outside of it. I guess that’s not so surprising since it will be an event of some significance for all of us.

Thus our apocalyptic literature is robust and expansive in every culture around the world.

“Apocalypse,” by the way, is a Greek word which means “revelation,” or “unveiling,” or “disclosure.” “Apocalypse” or “Revelation” is the name of the last book of the Bible, and the adjective “apocalyptic” refers to the end of the world.

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord 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

So what’s the greatest book or movie about the end of the world? *I Am Legend*, *The Road*, *World War Z*, *Children of Men*, *The Stand*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *A Quiet Place*, 2012, *Greenland*, *Armageddon*? According to one website, the greatest apocalyptic film ever is *Mad Max: Fury Road*.¹ Personally, I am partial to *Don’t Look Up*.

¹ <https://movieweb.com/best-apocalyptic-movies/>

My preacher friend Scott jokes about walking into a bookstore and finding a sign reading “Books on the Apocalypse Have Now Been Moved to the *Current Events* Section.”² You see what he means. A pandemic has turned into a tripledemic. Three multiple homicides these last two weeks in the United States. Blue Americans hate red Americans, and vice versa. The Kremlin is misled by a miscreant who is at once both malevolent and incompetent. He’s all Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse rolled into one: Death, Famine, War, and Conquest. It’s all *Current Events*, and it’s all a little ominous.

One day near the end of his ministry, Jesus teaches his disciples about the end of the world. “There will be wars and rumors of wars,” he says. “Nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be earthquakes and famines.”

But then he gets to his main point and says, “But about that day or that hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor even myself. Only the Father knows. It will be like the days of Noah. People are going about their normal business, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and then suddenly a few rain drops sprinkle the earth and it doesn’t stop raining for 40 days and 40 nights.

“Therefore,” says Jesus, “Therefore keep awake, for you do not know what day your Lord is coming.” He wants us to remember that we do not know when the end is coming, the end of our puny little lives, or the end of the whole cosmic order itself.

This is the passage the Common Lectionary gives us to think about on the First Sunday of Advent every year. Now you know why I frequently **abandon** the Common Lectionary to choose my own Scripture Lessons. There’s some weird stuff in there.

² Scott Hoezee, “In the Days of Noah,” a sermon for Advent 1, <https://cepreaching.org/written-sermons/advent-1a-the-days-of-noah/>

But you see why the Common Lectionary wants us to think about this apocalyptic literature on the first Sunday of Advent every year. “Advent” is a Latin word which means “to come,” “to arrive.” And the Lectionary wants us to remember that Jesus is the one who **came** and will **come again**. He came long ago to that feeding trough in Bethlehem, and he will come again on clouds of glory as a thief in the night. Christians live between the two Advents.

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The thing is, it’s been 2,000 years. As year succeeds to year, and century to century, and millennium to millennium, that spectacular Advent, that glorious future arrival seems unlikely and unlikelier. So I want to think this morning with the mind of the Christian Skeptic, who takes his Bible **seriously**, but not **literally**.

Because passages like the one I just read have elicited all kinds of empty, futile speculation about the Anti-Christ, 666, and the rapture, which is a word, by the way, that never appears in Scripture.

Barbara Brown Taylor notices all the bumper stickers which read, “If the rapture happens, this car will be driverless.” But then she notices other bumper stickers which read “If the rapture happens, can I have your car?”³ Some people think it’s all a big joke, and it probably is.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Don’t Say When: Expecting the Second Coming,” *The Christian Century*, September 21, 2004, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-09/dont-say-when?reload=1669422150719>

So let me skip all the idle speculation and cut to the chase and reduce Jesus' wise words to their distilled essence: Keep awake, because you do not know when the end is coming. One sharp raconteur asks, "How many people in your life have you already had your last conversation with?"⁴ Do it now. Don't put it off.

Life is short. You don't have time to indulge your animosities, nurse your grudges, swagger in your fraudulent superiority, avoid the lonely, or scorn the different. Cultivate your best self now. Magnify and multiply your virtues now. You don't want to be on the wrong side of history, because he's coming back—literally or figuratively—he's coming back, like a thief in the night.

On our recent Alabama pilgrimage, we visited The Legacy Museum in Montgomery, founded by Bryan Stevenson who wrote *Just Mercy*. The Legacy Museum tries to teach us what it was like to be white or black in 1960's Birmingham or Montgomery.

The museum has all these photographs and video clips of beautiful, smiling, runway-ready white teenagers in bobby sox and letter jackets. They look like fraternity brothers and sorority sisters luxuriating in their privileged, youthful camaraderie.

"Two-four-six-eight," they chant. "Two-four-six-eight, we don't want to integrate," like it's a fight song or a cheerleader routine.

It's what the mob chanted at Ruby Bridges when she integrated that elementary school in New Orleans in 1960. "Two-four-six-eight, we don't want to integrate."

⁴ Jonny Sun, author of *Everyone's a Aliebn When Ur a Aliebn Too*, Ted Radio Hour, December 18, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/947666071/making-sense-of-2020>

These kids were well-dressed, well-coiffed, well-raised, nice, and polite. They look just like your New Trier son or Northwestern daughter. They went to church every Sunday, every single Sunday of the year. They confessed Jesus Christ as their ever-loving Savior.

Some of them are still alive today. They would be in their 80's now, but that image is how they'll always be remembered. It's frozen in time. It is never too soon to get it right.

"Life is short. You don't have time to indulge your animosities, nurse your grudges, swagger in your fraudulent superiority, avoid the lonely, or scorn the different."

Pam Burrell attended Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, in the 1970s. She was the only Black woman in her entering class. When she arrived, she discovered that her dorm room had been configured so that she and her roommate wouldn't have to share a bedroom. When she asked why her room was built that way, they said, "We thought you would be more comfortable."

In her sophomore year, Pam volunteered with 11 other students to visit the Washington State Penitentiary, maximum security. She went every week for two years. She says, "It was the place where I felt most at home."

One week, Pam discovers that she is only volunteer to show up for that visit. It turns out that the smash group The Ohio Players is visiting the campus that night, and everyone is going to the concert. So she drives the white van by herself to the prison.

When she arrives at the prison, the inmates ask why she is the only one. She explains that all the other volunteers are watching The Ohio Players. The inmates poke gentle fun at her. "What's the matter? You don't like The Ohio Players?" She says, "It's my favorite group." "Then what are you doing here?" they all ask. She says, "Because I love you guys, and I want to do everything I can to help you thrive."

—Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V. Hides

The room goes suddenly quiet; no one makes a sound. Then one guy starts to cry. He finally says, “Nobody’s ever told me they loved me before.” Then the other guys start to weep, then they all start to weep, including the prison guard who is watching them. Even Pam is crying.

Later, she says, “I don’t know if that program helped those guys, but it sure helped me.”⁵

What will he find you doing when he comes back like a thief in the night—literally or figuratively? What will you be doing when the world comes to an end, your own personal world, or the cosmic order itself?

Christians live between the two Advents. He came long ago at Bethlehem, and he’s coming again—literally or figuratively, he’s coming again, like a thief in the night. We live *In the Meantime*, “mean” as “in the middle,” and sometimes “mean” as in “cruel and unkind.”

Theologians are fond of talking about “The Already and the Not Yet.” Jesus has **already** come but is **not yet** finished. The world has **already** been saved but is **not yet** whole. Satan is **already** crippled, but not yet defeated. God’s plan has **already** been enacted, but **not yet** fulfilled. The slant of history is **already** toward the light, but the full light has **not yet** arrived. You’re leading 38–23 and then you intercept the Buckeye quarterback. 38–23! But there are still 4:19 left in the game. You’re **already** on the verge of victory, but the game is **not yet** over.

All praise and glory and honor to Jesus the Regent, who has **already** come, but **not yet** returned. Stay awake, keep watch. When he comes again, let him find you visiting the prisoner, loving the unlovable, and welcoming the stranger.

Eternal God, we gather today satisfied by the meals and company of the past few days. Let gratitude and praise continue to flow from our lips as we enter this new season known in candlelight and giving, sparkling snowflakes and twinkling lights, joy and anticipation mirroring the hope we have for your coming. Yet we live in a weary, suffering world and often fail to recognize you in our midst. You are our true hope, our path in the wilderness, our light, and our salvation. We keep watch with anticipation for your presence and the arrival of your reign.

In this meantime we wait, we prepare, and we put our hope in your steadfast love. Holy God ground of our being, you dwell with and among us:

In every corner of the earth,
Gracing our tables with food and laughter.
Weeping with all who know war and hunger,
Grieving with all who long for their beloved,
Keeping watch over the bedsides of the sick,
especially as flu and RSV take hold this season,
And many we know suffer from long term illnesses
You dwell with and among us, holding the hand of those who walk in darkness, searching for the light.

You are the morning dawn breaking forth over every day of our lives, from the first newborn breath to those last tender days, comforting every heartache and rejoicing in every joy.

You are as close as our breath and at the same time you are there, in the farthest reaches of the world, in lands whose names we find difficult to pronounce, with people in search of safe haven, food, and shelter; and in places where the customs are foreign to us. Your presence transcends every boundary and border.

In the meantime, when we watch and we wait for that unknown hour, be our true hope. Prepare us to live in your holy presence now and forever. Make us ready for the fullness of your reign, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who teaches us to pray...Our Father... Amen.

Draw near to our hearts and homes O God, where we remember those facing surgery and illness this week, those who walk the winding path of grief and loss, and those who struggle to find true friends. Let your healing and grace move between and among us, a murmuration, a soothing balm for every ache.

On beaches, in backyards and by beautiful and broken places you assure us of your love, O God. And so we seek to walk in the steps of Christ, who says “follow me,” Jesus the one who teaches us to pray: Our Father...Amen.

⁵ Pam Burrell, “My Unlikely Brothers,” a story for *The Moth*. https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=11550