

Year A Advent 1 Active Waiting Matthew 24 vv36 to 44

Today we begin the season of Advent. It is often called the season of waiting.

Advent means “presence” and we are waiting for Jesus’ physical presence among us once again. Isaiah tells us of the world of perfect peace that we are waiting for when Jesus appears again. Jesus paints a picture for us today of this time of waiting and it is not what we would normally think of when we think of waiting.

Waiting often implies doing nothing – or at least, nothing very important as we wait. We wait at many traffic lights. We spend countless hours sitting in various offices for different types of appointments. Trying to phone the government or any company or corporation quite frequently results in being put on hold and we wait...listening to music meant to keep us content as we wait to talk to a human being at the other end of the line.

Samuel Beckett wrote a play called, “Waiting for Godot”. The play pictures two pitiful characters awaiting the arrival of a mysterious Godot. But Godot never comes. The waiters squander their time in pointless conversation and trivial concerns. Toward the end of the play, weariness overtakes them, and one of them asks, “Was I sleeping...Am I sleeping now?...of me too someone is saying, ‘He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on.’” In the last scene, the same character asks his companion, “Well? Shall we go?” The other responds, “Yes, let’s go.” But they do not move. And the play ends. The stage goes dark and the two characters are left sitting, doing nothing (story from *New Proclamation Series A*, p.7).

This is not at all the image of waiting that Jesus stresses in his words of advice to us this morning. He doesn’t, in fact, even use the word “wait”. Jesus tells us that we must “keep awake”, stay awake, and “be ready”. In contrast to simply waiting and

frittering away our time, these words imply a state of constant vigilance, ready for anything at any time. He also tells us why we must be in this state of ongoing readiness – because we do not know when he will return. Contrary to the human urge to know everything, Jesus stresses over and over again throughout his advice to us that we do not know. People over the centuries have spent many fruitless hours pouring over Scripture – trying to match up Jesus’ words, and the words of others, to events that are happening in the world around them. Just before today’s bit of Jesus’ words to his disciples, he has warned them of fires, earthquakes, conflicts, and insurrection. People look around and think it’s happening...continuously throughout history people have looked around and thought it was happening...and they have been wrong. Jesus is incredibly blunt with us. We do not know. We will not know. The point is that we must not spend our time trying to figure out when he will come again but, rather, we are to spend our time being ready for when he will come again.

It will be as in the time of Noah, Jesus tells us. People will be going about their daily business unaware that anything big and unusual is about to happen. They knew nothing and were swept away in the flood. Jesus goes on to say, two will be working in the field, one will be taken, one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together, one will be taken, one will be left. This is the perfect opportunity to set straight a very misguided but popular view of what will happen to people when Jesus comes again. These words of Jesus have been used to support what is called “rapture” theology. The good people will be taken away by God to live in heaven and the poor unfortunate others will be left behind to fend for themselves in horrible times awaiting judgement. This rapture theology is incredibly new on the scene – it appeared just in the 1830’s and is a product of misreading and

misinterpreting scripture. I mentioned just a short while ago that only 14% of Canadians who call them Christians actually read the bible – and, even then, it is only about once per month. Most people rely on mainstream thinking to tell them what to believe is in the bible. Mainstream thinking is often wrong. Let's think about this. Two people are going about their daily chores, one is taken, one is left behind. If you are in Ukraine approached by a Russian soldier, you do not want to be the one who is taken. If you are a woman in Iran approached by the morality police, you do not want to be the one who is taken. And if you are a Jewish person listening to Jesus speak, if you are approached by a Roman soldier, you do not want to be the one who is taken. The one left behind is the fortunate one. It is the one who is taken away who will be in dire straights.

It will be as it was in the time of Noah, Jesus tells us. In the time of Noah, it was the wicked who were washed away by the flood waters. The righteous Noah and his family were left behind and were given a fresh new world to enjoy, a world cleansed of all its brokenness. Jesus' point is that those who had turned away from God were swept away. He is warning his listeners to not fall into the same trap of knowing there is a God but not living like we know there is a God. Our lives must always reflect the knowledge that we live in God's kingdom and, one day, that kingdom will be brought to perfection.

We are not to live focused on the uncertainty of when Jesus will come again. As we saw in Samuel Beckett's play, the men waiting for Godot were so focused on the future that they neglected to live in the present and it got them nowhere. "Even Noah knew only in general terms what was coming. The same is true for Jesus' disciples and [for us] today, who are expected to know only that the coming of the 'Son of Humanity' is certain, but not when it will happen. This is a hard pill to

swallow for modern control freaks in an era of data analytics, artificial intelligence, and long-range forecasting” (Michael J. Chan, workingpreacher.org). We do not know when Jesus will come again but we know it will happen. Jesus will come again to bring the kingdom of God in all its fullness because he already started the process on the cross. His death and resurrection is the pivotal moment in the drama of the Gospels and it is the focus of our year as we live as characters within the great Story of Salvation yet unfinished. Jesus, we are told, is the “first fruits” of the coming perfection, the first of many who will be resurrected to enjoy life with him in the perfect world Isaiah has pictured for us.

It is the certainty of our hope, the certainty of knowing God will keep God’s promises, Jesus Christ will come again, the world will be made perfect, this certainty allows us to live in the uncertainty of the “when” this will happen. The state of wakefulness, of watchfulness that Jesus encourages in us today is a state of being active in our certain hope.

The people in Noah’s day, the men in the field, and the women grinding meal, might have done things differently; the owner of the house that was robbed might have done things differently if he had known a thief was in the neighborhood, but none of them knew. We have an advantage that all those people did not have. Knowing that Jesus will come again allows us to transform our lives now. Jesus brought the kingdom and we are awaiting its perfection. The amazing thing is that God has chosen us to help bring about this perfection.

And so, our waiting is not the passive, idle away our time sort of waiting at traffic lights, in waiting rooms, or on a bench waiting for a mysterious person. Our waiting is watchful, ready...it is active. Paul tells us today of the sacredness of our waiting –

sacred because the longed-for coming is something that has already begun.

Salvation is nearer now than when we became believers Paul tells us. We are to “put on Jesus Christ” as if we were putting on a suit of armour made of light. God has already been here in his Son, and God is still here now in God’s Spirit. Our armour of light is shown to the world in what we say and do and, in doing so, we hasten the day when Isaiah’s vision of perfection will be a reality. We are, right now, today, very much involved in the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness.

The amazing reality that who we are and what we do hastens the perfection of God’s kingdom is astounding news worth being excited about and certainly worth sharing. Share with family and friends that we give food and toiletries and hundreds of dollars to our local foodbanks because we are hastening the day when no one will go hungry. Share with family and friends that we raise thousands of dollars to end homelessness in our communities, to provide homes for orphans in Madagascar, to buy the farm in an underprivileged country because God’s people share God’s abundance and in God’s kingdom everyone will have a home. Share the wonderful things that we do for each other, for our neighbours, for the wider community, for the world, because we are hastening the spreading of God’s perfect kingdom throughout the world: from Jerusalem, to Judea, to the ends of the earth as Jesus says in Acts. Let your lights shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Our lights are shining. Tell people they’re shining. Share the good news of God’s arriving kingdom and invite others into that kingdom to experience the hope and the joy and the excitement with us.

God is present and active in our world – through us and through other means. God is working to draw all things toward their intended perfection and we are a part of

that through our active, vigilant waiting. When Jesus died, the disciples huddled in the darkness of the upper room behind a locked door. But the women, Mary Magdalene and another Mary, remembered that Jesus said he would rise again and they went to the tomb to see for themselves. They put themselves where they can see what God is doing. They are watching and ready. Rather than waiting in the darkness of the upper room or on a bench as the stage lights go out, let us put ourselves where we can see what God is doing. Let's tell others and invite others to be there with us. Keep awake. Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.