

Today we begin to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Jesus’ coming. At least in this place, we won’t talk about how many shopping days are left. We won’t frantically review our lists. We won’t look at our calendar or iPhone and gasp. No, we take a deep breath, and believe it or not, we relax. Advent is a time when we need quiet space and a sense that time moves slowly.

I know a woman, one of the busiest people I’ve ever known, who always tries to get her Christmas shopping done before Advent begins, so she can focus her attention on the spiritual meaning of the season during the four weeks of Advent. For most of us, including myself, it’s way too late to get our shopping done before Advent begins, because it begins today. But we can still take time to set aside some quiet space in our busy schedules for reading the Scriptures, for reflection, and for prayer.

Our passage from Matthew speaks about a second advent, the second coming of the Son of Man. And what does Jesus say? *“But about that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”* (Matthew 24:36). No one knows anything about when this will happen, except that the day is coming when all things will reach a final consummation.

Jesus’ message in this passage is: keep watch and be ready. In other words, pay attention! This passage calls us today to watch and wait for God’s presence, to work for God’s peace, and to hope for God’s fulfillment.

First, we are to watch for God’s presence. We are to pay attention. We can easily be lulled into a kind of trance by the routines of life. If you’ve ever taken a train ride, you know how the gentle jostling of the train can give you a sleepy feeling, or you can gaze out the window daydreaming as you roll along.

But our call is to be wide awake, to look around us, to see the ways that God is with us now. Remember, Jesus has come; the Holy Spirit is ever-present. We aren’t just waiting for some far-off event. We live with God now.

Annie Dillard speaks of attentive walking, in which “my left foot says, ‘Glory,’ and my right foot says, ‘Amen’” in her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. (New York: Perennial Library, 1985, p. 271). Just as with walking, we can practice the spiritual discipline of paying attention anywhere, any time—all day long. We don’t have to sit down, or kneel, or close our eyes, or stop what we’re doing. Eating, doing the dishes (something I do ALL the time), or sitting in a meeting (something I honestly do ALL the time), we can live in attentive awareness of God’s presence.

We also need times when we pay attention more closely to God’s presence with us, when we need to sit down and concentrate on God’s will for us and our world. So we’ve also got to sit down; I suggest with the Scriptures open and our ears open for what God will say to us. We’ve got to watch and listen.

Next, we are to work. Jesus says two men will be in the field, two women will be grinding meal. We continue our work—ever watchful, but busy with the task at hand. Isaiah the prophet has a vision of a peaceful world, which we know can never be completely fulfilled until God makes it so. Yet there is

plenty of peacemaking work to be done among Christians as we struggle with divisive issues. And we can find peacemaking work to be done in our nation, among polarized people who can't seem to get beyond their differences. We'll always find plenty of peacemaking work to be done in our world, in dozens of places close to home and around the globe.

While we are called to watch, we are not called to sit down and *watch our watches*, mindlessly passing the time until Jesus comes. We are called to work, to speak God's word to a divided and desperate world, serving in God's name.

Finally, as we watch and as we work, we hope. The watching, the awareness of God's presence, gives us strength to work. The work leads us to hope. Without hope, we will certainly burn out in our work. It can be tiring and frustrating to be a peacemaker in a world that is not at all peaceful. But the frustrations can lead us to hope, to the knowledge that only God can bring order out of disorder, hope out of hopelessness.

While in our day these verses from Matthew have often been tamed to mean that individuals and the church should offer charity to "those in need," in the context of Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats that follows in Matthew 25, this teaching challenges our allegiances. Jesus is about building an international fellowship of love that unites people across and in spite of national loyalties and family ties. Jesus indicates people are divided not by their affiliations but according to the love they have shown or withheld. Indeed, in the Great Commission, which comprises the final words of Matthew's Gospel (which I say at the outset of every service of baptism), Jesus sends forth his followers saying, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.*" (28:19-20).

When the church talks about Christ coming again, we are referring to *the close of the age* when all barriers to God's full authority in our world will cease; a time when the world will embody the peace God has always and ever intended; a time when our world will be ordered by love. Then let us live now, with anticipation of that new world, undeterred by national loyalties or the tests of our reputation, or deeds that our unfaithfulness will betray, but with full trust in the One who has promised to be with us, no matter the day or the hour. That will be the very best way of living in hope.

Vaclav Havel, the first post-communist president of Czechoslovakia, wrote about hope in the 1980s, while his country was still under communism: "Either we have hope within us or we don't: it's a dimension of the soul...Hope in this deep and powerful sense is...an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed...It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do here and now" (*Disturbing the Peace*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, pp. 181-182).

Havel's hope eventually did come to fruition, at least in part, as will our hope in ways even more complete and powerful. And even on the days when hope seems almost nonexistent, when the news coming from near and far seems nothing but bad news, when our own lives seem in as much chaos as the world, God's hope is still there. God's promise still assures us that all is not lost, that a new day will come, that it does not all rest on our weary shoulders. God is the one who will establish this new world—

that is his promise.

We are called, over the next month, to watch: to pay attention for the glimpses of God's presence we will see if we can look past the store displays and past the crowds of frantic people.

We are called to work: to do the things that make for peace right now, to give of what we have to help those who are hungry, to do much more than fill that empty space under our Christmas tree in a few weeks.

We are called to hope: to put aside our cynicism and despair, to embrace the hopeful vision of Christianity, and to let it touch our lives in this season.

Steven Handel wrote a piece a few years ago for an online resource called *The Emotion Machine*, a site about psychology and self-improvement. He begins by saying, "There's an important kind of wisdom in knowing what you don't know. Too often we fall into the delusion of thinking we know a lot more than we really do, commonly known as "illusory superiority." This can often make us stubborn in our beliefs and unwilling to accept new information. Ultimately, it stagnates our growth.

Recognizing what you don't know, says Handel, actually puts you in a unique place of power. It can improve your choices in life, because it's an honest view of your knowledge and capabilities, as well as your ignorance and limitations." When you know that you don't know something, there are a range of things you can do to improve your situation:

- Knowing what you don't know teaches you the areas in your life where you need to seek more information.
- Knowing what you don't know gives you the opportunity to refer to someone else who can help you.
- Knowing what you don't know allows you to step back before making an ignorant or hasty decision.

Understanding the limitations of our knowledge puts us at an advantage compared to people who overestimate their knowledge or aren't aware of what they don't know. This isn't a negative thing. It's about being honest with ourselves. To know more about what we don't know, makes us willing to test our beliefs and assumptions, however certain we may be that they are true.

When we know that we don't know something—such as the day or hour when Jesus will come again—there are a number of things I suggest we can do to get ready:

- Knowing what we don't know about Jesus' return teaches us that faith is an area of our lives in which we need to be constantly learning and growing.
- Knowing what we don't know about Jesus' return gives us the opportunity to turn to someone who can help us understand—Jesus himself and his teaching contained in the gospels.
- Knowing what we don't know about Jesus' return also allows us to step back before making a bad or hasty decision. That is why a thoughtful and prayerful Advent season can be so helpful to each of us.

So how do we get ready for Jesus' coming? Knowing what we don't know, we wait, we work, and we hope. And there's no better time than right now to be waiting, working and hoping. Amen.