**Expecting the Unexpected** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
First Sunday of Advent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Mark 13:24-37 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 3, 2023

In the Book of Common Prayer, the service for compline (night prayer) includes the following closing prayer, attributed to Augustine:

*Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work or watch or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, comfort the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake.*

Compline, by design, is a service of *completion.* We reflect on the day that has passed, and we entrust ourselves to God’s keeping as we prepare to enter into the mystical and temporary death of sleep. But compline also holds space for those who are not preparing for sleep, *“those who work or watch or weep.”* Blessed are those who rest, and blessed are those who *keep awake.*

*“Keep awake,”* Jesus says in our gospel reading, ***for God’s new world is coming.*** Melissa Bills points out that *“in the Northern Hemisphere, this imperative to keep awake comes during a season of rapidly shortening days and early-falling nights. As we approach the winter solstice, and as our bodies crave more and deeper rest, the call to keep awake may feel impractical or ironic.”1*

Of course, Jesus is not speaking literally about our *sleep hygiene.*

He is speaking about *attentiveness* and *vigilance,* about being *spiritually prepared* for the arrival of God’s eternal reign when it breaks into the world.

Which reminds me of a chapter in Barbara Brown Taylor’s book *An Altar in the World* called *“The Practice of Paying Attention”*. In it she attends to the art of *reverence,* of paying attention to the world and encountering all that is *sacred, holy, and beautiful* therein. She writes, *“Regarded properly, anything can become a sacrament, by which I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection.”* To regard something properly is to engage in the practice of paying attention, which *“is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. . . . It is one way into a different way of life, full of treasure for those who are willing to pay attention to exactly where they are.”*

In the same way, Jesus urges *us* to be attentive, that we remain *prepared* for the full and final in-breaking of God’s reign when it comes. When we do this, when we commit to the spiritual practice of paying attention, we find that we catch glimpses of this reign each and every day—and we begin to *expect the unexpected.*

For example, God’s reign is found in the *dancing of a candle flame*, lighted in prayer at the end of the day. It’s in the *deep questions* that only come to us when we are frustratingly unable to stay asleep at night, in the *wonder of the stars* that rise at night. It is embodied by *the weary ones,* dozing in hospital recliners, beside loved ones who are sick or dying. It is found in the *twitching* of a cat’s ears. God’s reign is present in the holy gift of work.

Each day, Jesus again whispers this directive into our hearts: *Stay awake*. God’s kingdom will come, and we will be ready to welcome it. Because we have already been paying attention. We have already *awakened* and are holding vigil for the world.

Jesus also speaks of *end times* in Mark 13. He alludes to a definitive end of the age, in which the very stars will be shaken from the sky as the Son of Man returns upon the clouds. Jesus says that this *cosmic ending* is a present-generation reality, something imminent.

But in the same breath, Jesus keeps things vague, speaking of *“in those days”* and *“after that suffering”* without expanding on either phrase. Moreover, he warns us not to presume to know the day or hour when these things will take place. He opens the door here to the possibility that the end might just as easily be far off in the future.

Melissa Bills also said, *“I think we misread Jesus’s intentions when we treat his words here as a code to be cracked. There is no hidden Google Calendar invitation lurking in Mark 13 that schedules the end of the world for us as if it were just another work meeting, doctor’s appointment, or after-school activity.”2*

Rather, Jesus speaks of *End Things* as a way of contextualizing all the other things in life that feel like endings.

This is important to understand because the audience of Mark’s Gospel was the generation that witnessed the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., which would very much have felt *like the end of the world.* And Jesus’ followers, across generations, have continued to experience endings that are not yet *The End*.

For them and for us, Jesus’ words are a discourse *in hope.* This means that all the endings *that we experience* in this life are bound up and vindicated by God’s decisive and final sovereignty over all powers and principalities, all risings and fallings of empires, all agents of terror and chaos, and all boundaries of time itself.

It also means that God’s *final word* will be one of resurrection, not of destruction. Beyond all other endings that we experience in history, God promises us a stunning bonus scene, a celestial final chord. We persevere through this world’s beginnings and endings because we have faith that God’s final ending will be a decisive victory for all that is *good, beautiful, and true.*

It is easy, of course, to be overcome by *despair and destruction.* Every day, we’re besieged by so much ugliness — *corruption, bigotry, hatred, conflict, and war* — that it is hard to remember the loveliness of our lives and creation. Indeed, even the word *“beauty”* might seem shallow, self-interested, or even meaningless amid the suffering of these days. *How can we sing about peace, joy, faith, and hope now?*

*“In a world filled with terrors,”* wrote Thomas Troeger, *“the heart longs for a vision of divine beauty, and when the church fails to attend to beauty, the life of faith often becomes grim and onerous.”*

And he’s right.

Commenting on this, Diana Butler Bass said, *“Advent, with its tensions and contrasts, is a season of art. Think of the poetry, music, and visual images it has brought forth over the centuries. During these weeks, the Christian imagination turns toward humility, paradox, tenderness, waiting, and the maternity of God — Advent is the antithesis of all imperial and authoritarian temptations of the faith. It is the very embodiment of mystery, and its language is loveliness.”*

In other words, this is the season where the world we know runs headlong into the *dream of God.* It is the season of deep night that promises endless light. There’s no way to explain this and no theology that can fully express the wonder of these weeks.

And so, we invite poetry, music, and the arts to guide us. In these things, we experience and encounter our longings, the sacred, and our fullest selves.

Maybe that’s exactly what is most needed.

This season invites us to attend to that dream, the stars against the night sky, and the radiance of *beauty.*

As we read in Ecclesiastes: *“God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”— (Ecclesiastes 3:11).*

Friends, our text this morning has several *more than literal meanings.* For example, it is the return of Jesus *already experienced* as the risen Christ and the Spirit of Christ.  It is Jesus coming again in the rhythms of the Christian liturgical year.  Advent is (about) preparing for the coming of Jesus—about the coming again of the Christ who is already here.  Jesus also comes again in the Eucharist (Communion); in the bread and wine Christ becomes present to us.  And what is meant by the second coming is also the ultimate Christian hope—for that time, to use Paul’s language, when *“God [will] be all in all”* (1 Cor. 15:28).3

In short, to affirm that Jesus will come again to complete what he began is to make a commitment to his vision of the future, the dream of God.  A vision the church would do well to emulate.