



## GOD UNEXPECTED

December 1, 2019, First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

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Let me be the first to wish you a Happy New Year. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and with it a new church year begins. How the church measures time is never more at odds with the calendars we keep than now. The calendar that truly ‘counts,’ the one by which we order our lives and mark our days, tells us that New Year’s Eve is still 30 days away, with plenty of time to plan parties, make reservations, and buy champagne. And though Christmas, too, has a few weeks to go, it is in fact already here on full display, playing at full volume; with deep discounts on gifts in the stores and steep prices for trees on the sidewalks. Meanwhile, by its peculiar calendar, the church stubbornly insists, some would say inflicts, an odd accounting of time. The only place Christmas is not yet here is inside the church.

Here, the year opens with a posture of waiting. As the December days grow shorter and darkness falls ever earlier outside, the church lights one, then, two, three, and four faint, flickering candles within, as our great statement of faith. While upbeat tunes relentlessly sound to keep shoppers pushing ahead, here we are invited to pause. To consider a dissonant chord—to sing hymns in a minor key, plaintively leaning us toward that which we hope for but has not yet come, at least not in full.

Yes, leave it to the church to really know how to throw a great New Year’s party! We awkwardly hide our toasting glasses as the lector reads: “Let us live honorably...not in reveling or drunkenness, not in debauchery or licentiousness...” And we ministers especially relish the First Sunday of Advent as, every year, fresh from Thanksgiving tables, we usher our congregations into the new church year with apocalyptic predictions of the end of all things when Christ shall come again.



How it will come without warning. Like that flood in the days of Noah, all of us will be swept away due to our lack of curiosity about our neighbor building a boat in his driveway. Or, like those tending to their usual, daily tasks, suddenly one of us is gone and one of us is left without explanation for how our respective fates were decided. That's how it will be when the Son of Man comes, Jesus says in Matthew 24, stoking our worst fears: You can look for all the signs you want, but there will be none. Just as a thief doesn't announce plans to break into your house, so God will not announce the time when Christ is going to break into the world again. Keep awake therefore. Be ready. Merry Christmas. Happy New Year.

Fifteen years ago, when I was working on a journal article about these Advent texts, I had a close encounter with one of the images we heard today. I was alone in my house asleep. I woke up around 2:30 a.m. to a flashlight beam shining outside in the darkness. I was still trying to take in what was happening when suddenly the back door of the house opened with force. Footsteps made deliberate progress into the house; the flashlight beam now moving through the rooms around the one in which I was now very much awake. These were the days before doorbell security systems and a cell phone at every bedside. The beam came closer, to the entrance of my room. "So this is how it's all going to end," the thought floated briefly through me. It was do or die time, I figured, so I said, "Who's there?" The flashlight stopped in mid-air at my doorway. No answer came; which really didn't seem like a good turn of events...because now whoever-it-was knew someone was home and that someone was a woman alone. So I summoned the courage that comes from having no other choice and I repeated, with as much authority as I could muster, "WHO'S THERE?!" The person ran out of the house. I tried to find my own footing. And a phone.

As scary as that experience was and as scary as this text from Matthew can seem, that incident has helped me clarify a crucial difference between a thief and the Son of Man and how, then, we might respond to this text. The thief breaks in to steal, to take away, to do harm. God in Christ breaks in to bless and to build. The Son of Man, who will come again as he first came into the world, suddenly, unexpectedly, in an unlikely way and place, he is coming to give life, not take it away. He is



coming to bring good things, not steal all that is precious to us. He is coming to complete the kingdom he has begun, not to topple it and us with it. It is Jesus who is coming again, after all, and we know him, so we do not need to be afraid. His coming is welcomed because he offers welcome. His coming is healing because he offers healing. He comes as the Light and in his Light is the healing of the nations. He comes unarmed, turning our swords, our guns into plowshares, our spears into pruning hooks until we don't even want to lean war anymore. As Isaiah 2:5 says: "Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Truthfully, I suspect Matthew 24 does not alarm us in the least. The imminent return of Christ does not capture our attention much, if ever. After all, it is pretty hard to "keep awake" and to "be ready at a moment's notice" for over two thousand years and counting. Matthew faced the same problem in his community barely two generations after Jesus' death and resurrection. Even back then people had ceased to feel a sense of urgency about Christ's return, delayed as it was. And is. Like them, we go about our lives without so much as a glance skyward. Today there are other worries about how the world might end.

This past Tuesday, the White House and the Capitol were briefly on lockdown and fighter jets were scrambled in the air because of a "slow-moving blob" (and that seems to be the military term for it so far) that was picked up on radar within Washington D.C. airspace. Despite the best radar equipment in the world, our military is still not sure what the object was...an enemy craft of some kind, a drone, or a flock of birds? In January of 2018, residents of Hawaii received text messages and public alerts that a missile threat inbound to Hawaii was imminent and to seek immediate shelter. It was a false alarm, just some whopping human error, but for about 20 terrifying minutes, people scrolled social media to find out if they were going to live or die. In a famous incident in 1938, Orson Welles created havoc when he broadcast over the radio the "War of the Worlds," convincing a lot of people that Martians had invaded New Jersey. People were gripped by fear. That hoax was repeated in 1949 in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, where it caused even greater panic. People ran from their homes, but did not know where to run to escape the invading extraterrestrials. Many people were Catholic so



they ran to church, perhaps to get right with God before the end. There are reports that husbands began confessing sins to their wives right there and then, and priests began absolving whole crowds at once.<sup>i</sup>

Surely Jesus does not want us engulfed in panic or to live, to wait, in fear and dread. Instead, his counsel to those of us who are his disciples is to always know what time it is. It is today, which is really the only day and this the only moment any of us have. To live mired in, weighed down by whatever happened yesterday or years ago is not to live fully in the present. And to spend all your time and efforts worrying and planning for tomorrow is also to miss what is all around you and in you this day. So, whether trapped in the past or preoccupied with the future, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “the end result is that very few of us live our lives while they are actually happening to us. We are cut off from the present. And God” she writes, “cannot get to us through all the layers of regret and expectation that we have swaddled ourselves in.”

The Christian year begins in waiting, attending to this time, for the coming of the baby Jesus into the world long ago in Bethlehem *and* for his coming again at a time unexpected, known only to God. But the truth is, Taylor reminds us: “that Christ comes again, and again, and again—that God has placed no limit on coming to the world, but is always on the way to us here and now. And the only thing we are required to do is to notice—to watch, to keep our eyes peeled.”

“Who knows?” she ponders. “Ours may be the generation that finally sees him ride in on the clouds...or, we may meet him the same way generations before us have—one by one by one, as we close our eyes for the last time. Either way,” she reassures us, “our lives are in God’s hands.”<sup>ii</sup> If we live and wait the way he taught us, we will be ready. We will always be ready. Happy New Year. Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/war-worlds>

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Expecting the Second Coming: Don’t say when,” in *The Christian Century*, September 21, 2004, 34-38.