

December 1, 2013 (First Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Matthew 24:36-44

TITLE: Advent Nostalgia

Advent marks the beginning of the church year. You would expect this first Sunday to be marked by scripture readings that are celebratory and upbeat. But in truth, the gospel lessons assigned for today are always about the end of the world. It's like you expected a birthday party with balloons and bright packages. Instead, you get an annual visit to an old professor's house, who lets you in and pushes aside some papers on the couch so you can sit down, who moves slowly with a slight tremor in his hands to pull an ancient book off a shelf with pages are thick and musty, and who, after adjusting his thick glasses and taking a long time to find the right spot, begins to read this to you:

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 those 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 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 unexpected hour. (Mt 24:36-44)

Most of the time, we don't want to think about the second coming of Jesus, the Son of Man. We let the professor read his words and then we try to change the subject, asking about his health or talking about superficial things like our Thanksgiving meal or the Steelers' painful loss to the Ravens. But sometimes we quiet ourselves down and before he closes the heavy book we ask him why he chooses that passage year after year. This causes him to take a deep breath and adjust his glasses and look us right in the eyes and say, "I read these words so that you'll remember that all of this means something." Confused, we ask, "All of what?" To which he replies, "History. All of history means something."

We are people of the present. We live in the "now," focused on today, this very moment. Sure, sometimes we look back and remember how things were in the past, when we were younger. And sometimes we look ahead and imagine where we'll be in five, ten or twenty years. But mostly we live in the now, just trying to get through the day, crossing off things on our "To Do" list before crawling between the sheets at the end of another long day. Advent forces us to stop and grapple with this important question, "Is there meaning to this life?"

On one side, the cynic in us looks at human history through the lens of politics, war, slavery, and pollution and like Shakespeare's Macbeth, we tell ourselves, "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." On the other side, the optimist focuses on children's smiling faces, flowers and music and art, and like the mystic Julian of Norwich says, "All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." But Advent is neither overly pessimistic nor overly optimistic. It stamps its foot down to get our attention and insists that history means something. Life is going somewhere and each day is important, so pay attention; be alert; be awake.

As these words sink in, we begin to ask ourselves, "Well, what are we supposed to do while we watch and wait?" We have two choices: scripture or "selfies." A few days ago, the Oxford Dictionary declared that the 2013 word of the year is "selfie", which is a self-portrait photograph taken with a smartphone or computer camera. How appropriate for our self-obsessed age that the word of the year is about pictures of ourselves. Yet in contrast, as soon as the scripture tells us to be alert and watchful, the very next passages are about others, about groups of people. We read about bridesmaids, some of whom were inattentive and poor planners while others did what was expected of them – and about servants entrusted with the master's money, some of which was invested and traded wisely while some fearfully buried the money in the ground – and then we hear about a time when people are separated into two groups, one side who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and helped the ailing while the other side consisted of folks who did none of those good deeds. Self-portraits vs. group portraits. Focus on number one vs. focus on the common good.

When the bible tells us to be alert and watchful, it isn't talking so much about vigilance as it is about field of vision. Christ calls us to keep our eyes focused on more than just ourselves; to love others as we ourselves wish to be loved. The wise Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel has said that true persons of faith have the ability to hold God and humanity in a single thought.¹ It is that type of dual focus, double vision, that marks Advent watchfulness. And it is in this spiritual vigilance that we remember that history matters. That all that has happened, is happening and will happen is intimately connected with God's hopes and plans for humankind. And we are a part of those plans, especially if we can stay alert.

The old professor has closed the book on his lap, slowly gotten to his feet and is sliding the book back into its place on the crowded bookshelf behind him. While his back is turned to you, a second question pops into your mind: "Why does Christ, the Son of Man, want to return to earth?" As soon as you say the words, you brace for the answer, expecting the old man to say words about judgment, separating sheep from goats, welcoming some and leaving others out to weep and gnash their teeth.

¹ Abraham Heschel, The Prophets, 1962, 1999; p. 21.

But the professor turns around slowly and after a pause simply says, “Nostalgia.” Seeing the confusion on your face, he continues. “Nostalgia, from the Greek words *nostos*, meaning to come home and *algos*, meaning pain, grief or longing. It’s a translation of the German word *heimweh*, meaning a painful longing for home. Christ wants to come home to us. Sure, God is with us always – in our past, our present, and our future days. But the mystery of the incarnation tells us that in the fullness of time, God emptied Godself and became human – how did Paul put it? – emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Phil 2:7). We believe that God in Christ lived and walked like us, ate bread and watched the sun rise and splashed in water and smiled at children and sat beside others in prayer. We believe that God in Christ breathed through his lungs, felt his heart beat, listened to songs sung by workers in fields, and fully knew how precious it is to be alive and to be together. Christ is impatient for this world to be healed of its brokenness, for it to study war no more, for food to be shared and all to be well. Christ is full of “algos” – a pained, persistent longing for us, full of sighs that are too deep for words.

The Advent reading speaks about one person being taken and another being left behind, but that’s symbolic language to emphasize the unexpected quality of Christ’s return. At it’s heart, Advent reminds us to watch and wait and work, serving a Christ who is watching and waiting and working and longing to return, full of nostalgia to be completely, utterly amidst us again. Do you believe that? Knowing that Christ is so anxious to return is what makes today meaningful – what makes history have a purpose – and what makes Advent the most important season of the year.”

Remember that part of the Lord’s prayer: Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. We are to get things ready for the one who is wants so desperately to return. Advent nostalgia. I suppose that’s part of the reason why we visit the old professor the same time every year. Thanks be to God.