

SPG#146, Advent 1A

December 2, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus said, **Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.** In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Happy New Year! Today marks the first day of a new year in the church, a new cycle of readings in the weekly lectionary and in the Daily Office, a new liturgical color, and a new Eucharistic Prayer, Rite 1. So today is a day of new beginnings, of change.

But, as is the case in every Advent, the first Sunday is not just a new beginning. For there is an ominous tone in some of the readings. Today's gospel speaks of the ominous in Jesus' words, **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.**

So again we face the Advent question of what do we do with these radical words from Jesus. We could say, "Well, after the resurrection and Pentecost, people in the first century really thought Jesus was coming again in the very near future."

So we, the readers of the scripture that they wrote, will understand if they seem a little bit too zealous about being ready and about changes in the earth.

On the other hand, no one can deny the tremendous climate changes going on in our world in the form of earthquakes, droughts, tsunamis, hurricanes, and more. Charles Handy in his book, The Age of Unreason, says that we live in a time of discontinuous change, or change that has no predictable pattern. So, do Jesus' words refer to the changes that we are seeing in the 21st century?

In my own study of these words and words like them, I think we must be careful of a few pitfalls in our hearing and in our listening to these scriptures. First of all, there is the 21st century pitfall of seeing such words as just more bad news in a world that is inundated with bad news via the mass media. And so if we are not careful, these Advent words can become part of the subtle burden that all of us carry as citizens of the 21st century.

The second pitfall I would call a *laissez faire* approach to this reading. That would have us saying something like, "These words may apply to our world, and may not. If they do not, then there is nothing to be concerned about. If they do, we cannot do anything about it anyway."

The third pitfall would have to do with exclusively approaching these words in too literal a way. And there have been, and still are, many predictions about this or that chunk of land falling off into the ocean. There have been, and still are, predictions of comets and asteroids hitting the earth and causing catastrophe. And those are just a few examples of many.

And so in contrast to dismissing these warnings as not applicable, and in contrast to dismissing these words because we are powerless whatever happens, and in contrast to an exclusively literal interpretation, I would offer a fourth alternative that could include parts of the other alternatives.

And that fourth alternative has to do with who the writers of these words, from our standpoint, seem to be. First, I think there is great consensus among biblical scholars that the gospels, as opposed to being written by one person at one time, were written by and tested in communities of faithful people. And so the possibility that writings would have been proofread again and again is likely. Second, I have found that the gospels primarily, beyond being writings of chronological history, or writings of exact descriptions, are writings that are meant to provoke toward faith. I have found that the gospels' primary purpose is to encourage the reader toward faith and more faith.

And so in regard to a fourth alternative, I would share that by asking a question for reflection: Is it possible that the gospel writers are trying to provoke us in these words about cataclysm and being ready? I would say “yes.” In fact, I am assuming that there were many discussions over which renderings would have been more or less provocative. And we have different versions of this kind of writing in the different gospel. For example, Mark speaks of the moon turning blood red, which is not found in today’s Matthew reading. Another question would be linked with the first: If they are trying to provoke us, toward what in the faith are they trying to provoke us?

There are some key words and phrases that are common to all of these gospel stories.

One is **watch**. Another in today’s gospel is **keep awake**. Still another is **be ready**.

I discern in all these provocative accounts the call to be more urgent in the faith, to be more aware and more prepared for what is to come, whatever it is.

Beyond any notion of bad news or disaster Advent is about waiting. It is about urgent preparation. It is about urgently anticipating. It is about urgently expecting. It is about urgently hoping. How urgent are you in the faith? Is it something that can be taken or left? Or is it something that **must** be done?

As Advent begins we will anticipate and foresee for a few weeks yet. But toward December 25 a flood of images will break forth having to do with angels, shepherds, and the Holy Family.

In Advent, while you are wondering about being watchful and aware and ready, you may hear the tired footsteps of a pregnant couple on their way to an inn. Or you may feel the brush of an angel's wing across your face as she goes to the concert of her life. Or you may be in a department store and hear a forbidden Christmas song in the middle of Advent.

I say to you, "it's OK." Because part of the meaning of Advent is being free to anticipate, being free to be excited and expectant.

Life for us is changing, and it seems with increasing rapidity. We can scarcely imagine what life will be like for our children. And I think behind the bad news headlines we may see a life that is new for us, a life that is unfolding in the 21st century.

We will need to adapt our faith and our lives to adjust to a new life that may seem wonderful and terrible at the same time. And that is a quintessential Advent exercise, getting ready, getting prepared, expecting, hoping, anticipating.

Advent is getting ready to cut loose. And it is not time to cut loose yet. For we have much urgent business in Advent. But when we do get there, what a day that will be. Amen.