

## ALERT, AWAKE & READY

Matthew 24: 1-44

The passage we've just heard read is scary isn't it? It speaks of a destructive time to come. It speaks of the collapse of buildings, natural catastrophes, false messiahs leading people astray... It speaks of the escalation of hostilities, leading to conflicts and all out wars... It speaks about the faithful and those pursuing justice persecuted and imprisoned while lawlessness abounds... So what is this passage pointing to historically? What is Jesus predicting will happen? Does it have any relevance for us today 2000 years later? And most importantly, does it offer any hope beyond the fearful devastation?

It is odd that the gospel reading appointed by the lectionary for this first Sunday of Advent is always a version of this scripture reading as found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Advent is a time for getting ready. We're anticipating the coming of Christmas. But how can such a scary passage of scripture have anything to say to us preparing for a season of celebration and joy?

Well, before we get to the time of Jesus and what he may be pointing to with the scary description he offers of what's to come, why don't we think about our own times and reflect on whether what Jesus is predicting prophetically has already come to be in some way. In fact, throughout history, Christians who have read this passage of scripture have always felt that Jesus was predicting their times. Has there ever been a time when there has not been destruction that is human made or because of natural catastrophe? Has there ever been a time when there have been no false messiahs leading people astray; or innocent people and those standing up for justice persecuted, imprisoned and even executed? Has there ever been a time when there have been no hostilities, conflicts or wars anywhere in the world? Even though every period in history is not the same, human civilization interacting with our planet earth has always been struggling somehow. The vulnerable and innocent have often been victimized and the ruthless, cruel and wicked have often triumphed through sheer aggression, brutality and greed.

And is it any different today? Think about our climate crisis and this passage's references to "famines and earthquakes" and other portents of nature's revolt. Think about how frequently false messiahs arise to lead people astray with conspiracy theories, the questioning of science, media and democracy if the information or advice is not in keeping with their views or their desire for power and control... Think about places in the world where justice is perverted and those who stand up to injustice are persecuted, imprisoned and often executed. Think about the struggle of indigenous peoples all over the world as colonial powers have seized land, enslaved peoples and turned our beautiful earth increasingly into a wasteland for resource production... Think about all the protests here and around the world for better working and living conditions, for freedoms and basic human rights. In fact, in so many ways what Jesus is predicting will happen has become prophetically fulfilled in our time and age as much as it has spoken into any time and age...

OK, fair enough. But let's ask again: is there any hope? Is there any way to prepare not only for disaster, but also for celebration and joy?

Well, before we can fully find the hope in what Jesus is prophetically predicting, we need to understand more specifically for his time, what he is pointing to. Jesus is not into making people feel good or happy at the cost of truth. Truth, like beauty, like love, like justice are absolute goods. They're always to be spoken, revealed and pursued no matter the cost. Jesus is the Messiah who is calling people into a journey toward salvation. Salvation means wholeness. But to get to wholeness by following Jesus, you have to pass through the cross of truthfulness, which can be painful and disruptive. Only then can new life that is genuine come to be. So then, if we want to celebrate with genuine hope and joy at Christmas, Jesus is telling us we have to open our eyes fully to the truth of things through Advent.

What is this truth in Jesus' world, then? What Jesus sees around him are people in power who are enslaving and destroying people physically and spiritually. There is Rome and Roman governors. There are puppet kings like Herod. There is an elite Jewish aristocracy called Sadducees who run the temple. They are all sucking the life-blood out of the people in order to live luxurious lives. They are greedy and ruthless. By predicting the downfall of the temple, Jesus is predicting that this whole corrupt system will self-destruct. The age of Herod and puppet kings will end. The temple will be destroyed and the whole order of the Sadducees with their high priestly families will be finished. Rome will come in and wipe it all away, and eventually, Rome itself will fall too, as always happens when violence creating fear and hate requires too much energy and force to sustain itself. In the meantime, many of the innocent and vulnerable will suffer and die. The truth is very fearful and sad even if it must be spoken.

OK, so when does all this happen? Jesus is speaking these prophetic words in about 30AD. Within 35 years things begin to go from bad to worse as revolts against leadership and infighting among various factions and gangs escalates to all-out war. In 70 AD, Rome sends in massive legions under general Titus slaughtering and crucifying tens of thousands, and burning Jerusalem and the temple to the ground. Jesus' reference to the "desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place" is an allusion to what had happened hundreds of years earlier when the Greeks had come into Jerusalem and desecrated the temple's holy of holies. This is spoken of in the biblical book of Daniel. Jesus is predicting this will happen again, and it does in 70 AD. All the gospels were written after these events took place, and so, all that Jesus predicted would happen, did happen. That's why it matters to the gospel writers that these passages are included.

But Jesus is also talking as if all this will be like the end of the world. He talks of the "Son of Humanity" which the gospels identify as him, coming back to collect his people who are either being persecuted and killed or escaping the destruction. And even though he is giving many signs and clues of when this will all happen and the critical importance of preparing for it, he also says: "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father."

So what's the message here, then?

1) First of all, whether it's something difficult and maybe terrible you know is coming, or whether it's something you cannot predict, you need to prepare. With our climate crisis, for example, we talk of being prepared. Preparing for a warming climate will mean more floods and fires, more droughts requiring more creativity in growing our food and protecting communities... Our battle is two-pronged:

we need to change those dimensions in our lifestyles that are accelerating global warming and we need to prepare our infrastructure for the warming. We must repair our relationship with our mother earth as much as we need to prepare for her reaction to our abuse.

It's the same on a spiritual level. We need to build up our inner selves before God, so that divine love flows into us to build up our inner confidence and peace, to unburden us of habits that are ultimately destructive because they are like weights pulling us down, and we need to build up our network of love in relationships and community around us. Isolation in ourselves will keep us weak and lacking in perspective on ourselves. We need others and we need to build up our inner selves. Isn't Christmas a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the relationships in our lives worth investing in and building up, and those things in our lives that are obstacles, be those obstacles habits or relationships that are not working and bringing us down?

2) Second and finally, Jesus tells his followers that in addition to getting spiritually ready for the conflagration to come, they should cultivate faith and hope in his coming to them. In their darkest hour, their time of persecution and suffering, their moments when all seems lost, he will come to them and embrace them with a love that is stronger than anything they're suffering... Wow! It takes a lot of faith and hope to believe love is that powerful sometimes, especially when all seems hopeless and lost... And yet, imagine if we could build up that kind of faith and hope in ourselves... Imagine if we could open ourselves up to receive Christ's Spirit in our worst moments. Imagine if after passing through our good Fridays in the grave, so to speak, we can actually rise up again into the newness of Easter Sunday...

If we believed this firmly, would we live through the dying in a different way? Christ's coming is about preparing ourselves whatever comes our way. It's about being alert and awake, knowing that we may pass through a time where we feel down and defeated, where the burdens, hurts and losses are too much for us to handle. It's about trusting that even if we pass through death, so to speak, God is still there and Christ will come with the clouds to draw us forth in his love to a new place.

If we are alive this side of the grave, life will look different for us. We will not be the same. But rather than bitterness at our loss, we will have a new measure of resilience in us. Rather than resentment at what we've had to go through, we may grow in our capacity for compassion. We may grow in our capacity to listen to others and accompany them through their passage through death to new life... We may find new boldness in our protest, advocacy and engagement so that we stand up for justice in a way we have been afraid to do before. All of this is possible, Jesus promises, when he comes to them. But first, he must tell them the truth to prepare them for what's to come.

And what if getting ready for Christmas is very much about cultivating anew faith and hope in Christ's coming as Spirit-energy flowing into those very areas in our lives we need it most? What kinds of spiritual practices could help cultivate such faith and hope in us? What kinds of conversations in our celebrations, and what kinds of rituals of gratitude and sharing may we develop this Christmas to build up our inner selves and our giving and serving outwardly? Is it going to be all about us getting more of what we don't need and escaping into an oblivion of forgetful revelry? Or will it become more about us discovering a new passion and joy in giving, committing and engaging?

Apocalyptic passages in the gospels are scary if we take them to heart. But they are also wake-up calls to vigilance, to preparing and to making use of times and opportunities to genuinely open ourselves to where Christ is calling us to go. I'm looking forward to the ways Christ may come to me this Christmas. But I'm also aiming to use my time to prepare and to be alert to what's happening in my world. How will I become the hands, feet and heart of Jesus in anticipation of his coming to me when I need him most?

What about you? How will you prepare spiritually for Christmas? Will you be alert, awake and ready? Amen.