

Get Ready! Here It Comes!

First Sunday of Advent, (Nov. 27) 2022

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

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This will date some of us, but I remember a TV advertising campaign in the early 1970's by Mennen's Skin Bracer after-shave lotion. The camera angle was as if we were looking back at this guy who is staring at himself in the mirror, and who has this dull, half-asleep look on his face. The guy pours Skin Bracer into his hand and slaps his own face with it. After a moment of shock, his eyes brighten and his face shines with new confidence and aliveness as he says, "Thanks! I needed that."

Many of you will remember that "Thanks! I needed that," became a pop culture catchphrase for about a decade afterwards.

Advent is like that Skin Bracer slap in the face. These texts wake us up and grab our attention. We didn't know we needed Advent; we didn't know we needed God's slap in the face. Advent is bracing. Advent is a wake-up. And the hope is that by the end of Advent, we'll say, "Thanks! I needed that!"

Let there be no doubt that Advent is not for the faint of heart. The word "advent" means "coming" and it's full of hard scriptures, wild prophets, apocalyptic signs and portents, judgement, and calls to repentance.

Advent is a time of tension. It's the "in between time," between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth said that Advent is really the posture of the church all the time. We're always living in between. The poet W. H. Auden said we are living "for the time being." Advent says Christ has come. Christ comes. And Christ will come again.

And part of the tension is living in the between these comings and learning to watch for the various ways Christ comes.

But part of living in between is also the tension of living in this world while also living as citizens, members, and participants in Christ's kingdom, the great Commonwealth of God. This time of the year, we feel it especially in the tension between Advent in church with the consumer Christmas frenzy going on around us. Advent calls us to prayer and to practice waiting and watching, patience and hope, while around us is shopping, buying, decorating, and frantic busy-ness. It's hard and we feel the tension.

The biggest tension is that Advent is right in the middle, in between the old age of Sin and Death and Domination that is passing away, and the new age or New Creation in Christ Jesus that is breaking in. Indeed, in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ, the New Creation has invaded this old system, with the church being the vanguard of the invasion. Meanwhile, the Powers and Systems of Death and Domination fight a rearguard battle to hold on.

The great prophet Isaiah foretold that someday swords would be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, guns and tanks into farm implements. That day of shalom, of justice and peace, began to come true in Jesus Christ. But the old age of violence resists the coming of the new age of shalom.

Flannery O'Connor said of her own writing, "My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil." The same can be said of the New Testament and especially the same can be said of Advent. We are participants in the invasion of grace in territory largely held by the devil.

Back in the 60's Civil Rights workers would move into somewhere like Mississippi or Alabama and do voter registration drives and education. It didn't take long before the local White Supremacists would shout that "outside agitators" were moving in and causing trouble by upsetting local segregation and racism.

Well, the church is the organization of outside agitators of God's grace and God's justice invading the territory of Death and Evil. And yes, it does cause trouble – good trouble as John Lewis used to say.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus has been going back and forth to the Temple in Jerusalem each day, and each day he is getting into more and more good trouble with the Religious and Political Authorities. He has overturned the moneychangers' tables, upset their money-making system, and denounced the whole corrupt Temple enterprise. He comes out of the Temple as Chapter 24 begins, and you can feel the tension. His disciples look up admiringly at the massive and impressive Temple that Herod the Great built, and Jesus says, "You know, the day is coming when this will be nothing but a pile of rubble."

The tension escalates. The disciples, like all disciples, find themselves in between the secure and seemingly stable past represented by the Temple and God's uncertain future containing a cross and sacrifice and commitment. They're in between. Immediately they want to know when all this is going to happen. Jesus says, "No one knows, not even the angels in heaven. Only God knows."

The rest of the chapter is Jesus teaching the disciples about upheaval and uncertainty as God's New Creation is coming but the old Systems of Domination fight to remain in power. Time and time again, Jesus warns that false teachers and fake leaders will come forward making all kinds of promises that will return them

all to past greatness and save everyone from uncertainty. Beware says Jesus. Don't fall for their rhetoric. Look for God and signs of God's New Creation instead.

Time and time again, Jesus warns against trying to know when the end of the old is going to happen and time and time again he says, that things like the end of the Temple, wars and rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes and such are not the end (24:6).

Let me pause to be emphatically clear about two things: (1) We do not know and cannot know the end of this old world. (2) We are not in control, and we cannot control or influence or manage God's New Creation breaking in. We can join it, but we do not usher it in.

This past month (Oct. 20) at a dinner in Tennessee, Congresswoman Lauren Boebert said, "It is an honor to serve in this time. I believe that many of us in this room believe that we are in the last of the last days and that's not a time to complain, that's not a time to grumble, to be dismayed, to be disheartened, but a time to rejoice." She went on, "You get to be a part of ushering in the second coming of Jesus."

I don't have time to un-pack all Congresswoman Boebert's faulty theology, much less her politics, but her theological notion that we can be part of ushering in the coming of Jesus is heresy.

Last year at another White Christian evangelical event she commented, "How many AR-15s do you think Jesus would have had?" She went on, "Well, he didn't have enough to keep his government from killing him." This too is heresy. Remember Peter himself tried to defend Jesus by grabbing a sword and Jesus condemned him.

I mention all this to help you be aware of the false rhetoric that goes on out there about the Bible and Christian theology and how to interpret it. Using violence to usher in the kingdom of God or make things come out our way, or to protect Jesus or force God's hand is the kind of stuff that Judas and Peter tried. It is wrong, false teaching – as Jesus reminds us in our Scripture today about being beware of false teachers, and it is dangerous. Bad theology and bad politics go hand in hand. And bad theology combined with bad politics get people killed. Beware!

In Luke's version of this Gospel story, Jesus says that we are to be alert and be on guard. In Matthew and Mark Jesus says we need to wake up. All the Gospels agree that we need to get ready. We are not in control, and we are not ushering anything in, but at the same time, we need to wake up and pay attention so we can join in. Jesus says like Noah of old, get ready. (Remember that the ark was and is a symbol of the church). He says that Noah and the ark were ready for the storms while everyone else were oblivious. Jesus goes on and again and again uses the same urgent word, "Wake up!" which is the same word Jesus uses over in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46) when he is in agonizing prayer while the cross looms over him. He tells the disciples to stay awake and watch and pray with him. He is in crisis; he feels the tension. In fact, the entire cosmos is in crisis and tension. Jesus is in a fight with the Powers of Death and Sin and Evil – if he takes up arms and uses violence, Death and Sin and Evil win. If he runs Death and Sin and Evil win. But if he faces the Powers of Death in the cross and embracing the cross and trusting the Living God to bring about redemption even though Death and Evil mean it for bad, then God's Way will win. Yet, he must enter the torture, pain, Sin, and Death of the cross with nothing more than trusting God. He must not only face Death; he must die. And while he is praying, with sweat like drops of blood falling from him, his disciples are nearby sleeping through it all. He implores

them, “Wake up!” He implores us, “Wake up! Pay attention to what is going on! Read the signs. The Powers of Death are at work, but God is at work, too!

We sleep for all kinds of reasons. Obviously, we sleep for rest and recovery of our bodies and souls. But Jesus is talking about sleep as a distraction and an act of denial and despair. Sometimes we sleep from boredom and sometimes we sleep to keep from facing uncomfortable things. Decisions that need to be made we put off and we go to sleep instead. Depression shows up in many people’s lives as sleep. We sleep excessively. We sleep to distract and ignore, be in denial, or give into despair. And despair means we have given up hope in the Living God. People in despair often will either withdraw and hunker down – sleep – or try to take control themselves and use violence to force things.

Whatever kind of sleep we find ourselves in – and it shows up in all our distractions – addiction to drinking, drugs, guns, consumerism, obsession with partisan politics, living on social media – whatever. Wake up to God and God’s kingdom, Jesus says. “Get ready! Be prepared! God is coming like a thief in the night. No distractions. No denial. No chasing after fake leaders and false preachers. Don’t give up and don’t give into despair.

In the *Lord of the Rings*, when things are dark and everyone is giving into despair, Gandalf says, “Despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not.”

Jesus says when things look bad, we do not give into despair. We disciples live by hope in the living Christ. It’s not over; the future is still open. So, we look for signs of God at work.

I've long been partial to two of Walker Percy's novels: *Love in the Ruins*, published in 1971 and subtitled, *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*. And in 1987 he published a sequel called *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In both novels the main church in America has become nationalistic, singing the *Star-Spangled Banner* during the Eucharist. But out in the Louisiana woods is a little, scattered, rag-tag church whose pastor is Father Rinaldo Smith, who also has a job as a firewatcher. Each day he climbs a watchtower to look for forest fires below and scan the skies for signs and portents above. In the later novel, the small church has an AIDS clinic and hospice below the watchtower.

Psychiatrist Dr. Thomas More comes from time to time to support Father Smith and help do ministry. Both More and Smith are officially discredited, both struggle with Depression and drinking, both see their work among the AIDS patients as service and ministry of the church done among the ruins of society. Father Smith says, "We ... visit, ... listen, speak openly, we to them, they to us, and we to each other in front of them, about them and about our own troubles, we being two old drunks and addled besides. They advise us about alcohol [and] diet" (*The Thanatos Syndrome*, p. 363).

Father Smith and Dr. More and the AIDS patients talk about dying, hope, and waiting, and Father Smith says, "It is not up to us in the church to say whether the world will end, but it is for us to say ... whether hope and faith will come back into the world" (p. 365).

Part of what Percy is saying is that the very existence of the church as an AIDS clinic and hospice is a sign of hope and faith. It is a sign of the New Creation breaking into the ruins of this old world.

Part of the paradoxical nature of Christ's New Creation, is that by participating in it, we see more and more signs of it. We wake up and get ready as we worship, as we serve, as we pray, as we give, as we love and show mercy, practice patience, and forgive and receive forgiveness.

Theologian William Stringfellow said that reading the signs of the times is among the most important gifts of the church. We'll know when to speak out and what to do, and how to do it. We'll learn to quit running off in every direction and instead, learn to give ourselves to the most essential. And in the midst of it all we will have hope.

More than anything else, when we discern the signs of God's kingdom breaking in among us, we are able to join God. We can actually participate with the living God we know in Christ.

Years ago, our youth group participated in the Agape meal at Broadway Baptist Church in Ft. Worth. The Agape meal is every Thurs. night at Broadway where homeless people, people from the streets are invited to dinner. Usually around 200 street people show up to tables covered in white cloths and where volunteers serve each table family style. I was going around pouring iced tea when the minister on that particular night stood up to make announcements, hear prayer requests, and lead everyone in prayer. He explained that he would lead in prayer and then everyone who wanted could join him in the Lord's Prayer.

So, when he called us to bow our heads, I stopped where I was and bowed my head. I was standing near several tables where there was some whispering, restless movement, the clattering of a few knives and forks and glasses and cups. As the minister came to the place in his prayer when he said, "as he taught us to pray ..." one man from the streets, nudged the guy next to him, who had his head

down on his arms sleeping, in a loud whisper, said “Wake up!” and then, to his whole table, “Get ready! Here it comes!” Immediately everyone within the hearing of his loud whisper, stopped whatever they were doing in anticipation. And when the minister said, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” everyone joined in. They continued, “Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come ...”

That homeless man was a prophet. He spoke the gospel. Wake up! Get ready! Here it comes. Thy kingdom is coming. The old is passing away. The new in Christ is breaking in around us. The shalom of swords into plowshares and guns into farm implements is coming. Look for its signs and be of good hope!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.