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ADVENT IA
Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 24:27-44
Watching & Loving

TIME – we live in it. We are always short of it. We want more of it. Time is one of those things we can fill up, use up, take up. We can run into it at a deadline, and we can run out of it when time's up. We can measure it, for progress, decline, or patterns. When we think about time, we don't just look at points along the way; we look for A POINT TO the way. We want to know, if there has been a POINT to our time. At the heart of all of this lies one deeply held expectation: we believe that OUR TIME SHOULD MAKE SOME SENSE. Nothing upsets us as much as the feeling that we have wasted our time. And if, for some reason, we need to WAIT before we can DO, or KNOW or HAVE something – there had better be a darn good reason. Afterall, we say, time is precious, time is money, time is fleeting. But whatever happens, time WILL BE SPENT. And so, we DEARLY WANT to know that we are spending it WELL.

The tension between the desire to spend our time well, and our ability TO KNOW how best to spend it, lies at the root of our discomfort with waiting. Generally, waiting is not something we do well. Somehow or other, waiting always seems to involve SOME degree of PATIENCE; which is as hard to come by as extra time! And the word itself means suffering. Even so, both waiting and patience are more bearable when we know WHY we are waiting, WHY we are SPENDING TIME.

As you know, Advent is a season of waiting. It is when the Church reflects on the coming of God's Grace into OUR TIMELINE. It also reminds us of ALL the times we have waited for a touch of grace. Whatever it may be, it is curious that Western Christians chose Advent as the beginning of the liturgical year. If you

want to commemorate beginnings, Christmas Day would make more sense; and good arguments could be made for Easter or Pentecost. But we Western Christians begin the Church year in the darkness of December, the waiting-time before Christmas, when fields lie fallow, and the spectre of winter creeps over city streets and country roads. This looks more like an ending than a beginning! And yet the Church calls on us to wait in the darkness; to watch without knowing where our next signals will come from. Of course, we never really DO know how our next glimmer of grace will show up!

The scriptures of the season reinforce this sense of watching in the darkness. If we KNEW what we were waiting for, we might have more patience. But we hear in Matthew's gospel today that God comes like a THIEF IN THE NIGHT, as a shock or surprise – which is to say: God comes to us in our ignorance, more than in our patience. Then, in the next breath the gospel tells us to GET READY, to PREPARE! But for what? The text says the 'coming of the Lord.' It could just as easily be translated 'the PRESENCE of the Lord.' So Advent is not just about waiting for the Baby Jesus, nor waiting for Christ's second coming. It is REALLY ABOUT the coming of God into your life NOW; the PRESENCE of God, TODAY.

The story says: "If the householder had known what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake..." We are told to keep awake precisely BECAUSE we DO NOT KNOW when God will be present. But we are assured that God shows up in our darkness, in our ignorance, maybe even in our pain. Advent is like lying awake in bed at night, not knowing whether sleep will come, good dreams or bad, or whether daybreak will EVER arrive.

Now lest we become TOO enamored of the importance of OUR OWN time, or make an IDOL of our own schedule, today's gospel contains a little warning.

This warning is easy to miss because it occurs in a play on words in the original Greek, but doesn't translate into English. In our text Jesus warns: "For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark... they **KNEW NOTHING** until the flood swept them away..." In Greek this is a pun. What it really says is "They didn't get-with-it, until the flood got-with-them," Or "They didn't tumble with it, until the flood tumbled them." And so, the waiting time is not just idle time. It is **NOT** passively waiting for something to happen **TO** us. Ralph Waldo Emerson decried that when he said, *We are always getting ready to live, but never living.* **THAT's NOT** the kind of waiting I'm talking about.

Advent calls us **TO WATCH** more than to wait. It is a time of **VIGIL**. It is a time to be alert – alert to the yearnings of the Spirit within us, and alert to the well-being of those around us. (Mary Heidish, *A Candle At Midnight*, 2001, p.41) In the presence of all our shadows, with **ALL** our senses, we are **CALLED TO KEEP WATCH over others** who may need healing. **FOR GOD COMES TO US** in the yearnings of our spirit, as well as the compassion we give to others. The fact that grace is always a surprise is **NO REASON** to lower our expectations, **DULL** our senses, or **GIVE UP** watching over those who need us. Advent is a time to **SHARPEN** our senses, and **WATCH KEENLY** for whomever needs some love: those around us, maybe even ourselves.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul puts all this very succinctly when he says: "You **KNOW** what time it is ... it is the moment for you to wake.... For salvation is nearer to us **now** than before...." Paul is **EXCITED** about watching, sharpening his senses, and broadening his service to others. He knows the secret to keeping vigil – he knows what our spirits yearn for, and why we keep vigil with those who

need healing. He simply says: “Owe no one anything except COMPASSION.”

(Romans 13:8-14)

And so, Advent is not a time for waiting. It is a time for watching, for keeping vigil, and above all, A TIME FOR LOVING. It is a time for PRAYING THE PRAYERS WE CANNOT HELP PRAYING, both the lovely ones and the painful ones. (M.Heidish p.46) Advent is a time for our hearts to awaken, so that the next time someone asks me “what time is it?”, I MIGHT JUST KNOW!