

Sermon for Nov. 27, 2016 – “Expecting the Unexpected”

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

The trouble with ordinariness is that it's so, well, ordinary! On the one hand, of course, the ordinariness of life is very helpful. It keeps us from stressing out with the changes and unexpected turns that so quickly and easily reduce life to utter chaos and turmoil. We thrive under ordinariness. We like having a certain set routine mainly because we're creatures of habit. But, don't we like knowing what to expect on any given day? Absolutely, but we also know that our routines can be interrupted. Life can occasionally throw us a curve. Sometimes by choices we make, other times by chance or circumstance beyond our control. When it does, how do we feel? Well, if we're honest, we'll admit that we can find life quite troubling and we can become very anxious, even fearful. And, as a defense mechanism, we find ourselves doing whatever it takes to get things back to the way there were, back to the ordinary, or as we often say back to “normal”. When we say that, what we're really saying is that the way things ordinarily are, the way things should always be. Because it gives us such a high level of comfort, we accept it as the norm.

That's the way it was **“in those days before the flood”** when **“people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage...and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and swept them all away.”** As the story is related in book of Genesis, apparently nothing Noah said or did could compel them to deviate from the ordinary course of their lives. There was no reason to think that the comfortable ordinariness in which they were engaged would be disturbed. They all thought Noah was crazy! Herein lies the problem with ordinariness. It hides from our eyes other possibilities, in particular, the possibilities that God proposes! See, God's not particularly interested in letting things stay as they are because the way things are, are too far removed from the way He created them to be or what they can be when God gets involved. God gets mixed into the ordinariness of life in most unexpected ways and it's always disturbing in one way or another! He keeps the pressure on to look beyond the ordinary. He wants us to consider new possibilities, to have extraordinary vision, to look beyond the ordinary and see things in extraordinary ways. This is what Isaiah's talking about in our first reading.

God's will is moving toward new ways for the world. “In the days to come...” says the prophet. Ah, what a vision of what's going to happen! God's going to step in and change the ordinary course of human events. Then, **“they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks!”** This will be God's work, why, because we humans are too caught up in ourselves, our own limited plans and vision. We're stuck in our self-seeking and self-serving ways, ways that have proved futile in the past and undoubtedly will prove futile in the future. But, only God can break the old apart and bring the new to pass.

Unless we expect the unexpected, we'll never catch this vision. Nor will we be able to live beyond the ordinariness of the present. “That's how it will be at the coming of the Son of man,” says Jesus, in this morning's gospel reading. **“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.”** God will dip down into people's ordinary lives on an ordinary day and really shake things up. The Lord's unexpected coming will cause a great separation between those expectantly awaiting His coming and those whose lives have been so caught up in ordinariness that they see no reason to expect anything other than the “same old, same old.” The word for “taken” is a word typically used after the fashion of Joseph taking Mary from her home to his or Joseph taking Jesus and Mary from Bethlehem to Egypt. It's not unlike the separation of the sheep from the goats, or the wheat from the chaff. The one waiting for the Lord's coming will be glad to go to the side of the one who comes for him, but the other one...Well, the other one, the one expecting nothing more than the ordinary, will be standing all alone.

That is what it will be like when the Son of man comes. “Who will He find waiting for Him?” Jesus is asking. Do we see the similarities between then and now especially as we begin Advent? Where was the tension, the expectation, the hope for that which came to the stall of Bethlehem? That’s a trick question, because there was none! Mary was puzzled when her ordinary life is so astonishingly interrupted by God’s messenger. Joseph was clueless about what’s happening until God breaks in and speaks to him in his dreams. The shepherds are surprised in the midst of their ordinary activity to hear that something had unexpectedly broken upon the earth. None of them had any idea what was going on, because none of them were expecting it! When the three wise men inquiry about this event in Jerusalem, nobody’s aware of anything having happened...most of them were sound asleep. Life had been going on very much the way it always had and anything as extraordinary as that about which the magi spoke, namely the birth of the messiah, seemed unlikely at best.

At the same time, Herod wondered if perhaps there wasn’t more to this than met the eye. Not that he was expecting the unexpected but he was taking no chances. If the unexpected **had** happened, Herod was going to make darn sure that things went back to normal, back to the way things should be, back to the way he wanted them to be. Nobody expected anything unexpected because only God can break into the ordinariness of life with the power and force of eternity.

What about us? Are we given to expect God showing up on any given day and doing something extraordinary? I don’t mean those cool, little “God moments” we sometimes have, I’m talking about mind-blowing, earth shattering events. Do we expect that? Probably not...Yet, all of a sudden 2000 years ago, there it was! But even then there was a certain “hiddenness” about it because this most unexpected and extraordinary event was concealed in a newborn baby, by all accounts an ordinary child to all who viewed Him. At first glance, one saw what one expected to see, an ordinary human birth. An ordinary child born to an ordinary young woman. You’d have to follow Him, listen to Him, watch His life unfold, before you could even begin to recognize how extraordinary this tiny baby was. God’s work was wrapped up in this man and concealed on a cross, where most of those watching saw it only as a monumental miscarriage of justice. But to see God’s work in that crucifixion, literally one of thousands, well, that’s just crazy talk! Seriously, who could’ve possibly expected that His death was anything other than a tragedy? It only became a bit clearer 3 days later that something more had taken place. But even so, it’s taken much longer, centuries, to begin to unravel the meaning of this death. To see it in a most extraordinary and unexpected way, as the way by which God changed the course of history. Actually, we’re **still** trying to understand it

Meanwhile, there’s some of this in our sacraments. Where, in baptism and communion, ordinary, everyday things like water and bread and cup become something more than meets the eye. When we expect to see nothing, that’s what we’ll see. If we expect the ordinary, that’s all we’ll see. But, Jesus tells us that these elements mean something more, so we see them as the means of grace they are. To expect the unexpected here is to receive life and hope, a new vision of what our lives can be by the blessing of God. But there’s something else. Something else with which the gospel text provides us, the secret of the Advent season. It’s extraordinary and found in what Jesus **doesn’t** say. It’s this: We don’t have to go anywhere! We simply wait. Jesus is coming to us! And why not? The word “Advent” means “coming”. Advent is a time of waiting, but not aimlessly, it’s an expectant waiting. A waiting for a promise to be fulfilled. A waiting for something beyond our imagination, beyond our dreams. A waiting for the unexpected that’ll surprise us. It’s a waiting for what God will do, and God will do something. And, what God does is often hidden within the marvelous light of His glory, a glory that is in fact so brilliant that it, itself, hides from our eyes what He’s doing!

At the same time, God makes what He's doing among us visible in the shadows of a child, a cross, water, bread and cup. God only asks us to expect Him to do what He deems necessary to do and then to receive what He does with thanksgiving. **“Therefore keep awake – keep your eyes open, be ready – for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”** Just know that He'll come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, at an **“unexpected hour.”** That's why Paul, as we just heard, wrote to the Romans: The hour has come for you to **“wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers.”** Those who wait for the Lord, those who expect the unexpected, know that they're to keep their lives in order.

We might do well, as Paul advises us, to **“live honorably as in the day...”** Let us, **“put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”** That's right folks, look busy – Jesus is coming! Live, conduct your lives, as though the Lord will appear at any time. Because, and here's the thing, He **can** come at any time. **Any** time!

Brothers and sisters – Advent is about many things.

- It's about being awake and vigilant in the midst of a world that would have us lulled into complacency...
- It's about watching, it's about looking for signs of God's activity in the world in the person and message of Jesus Christ...
- It's about waiting, about holding the gospel in a dangerous tension between world and word.
- It's about bearing a wild, totally unexpected and grace-filled countercultural message in imperfect human hands.

The challenge lies in effectively communicating the importance of the Advent season, of patience and waiting to a world that always seems to be in a hurry. The readings today and throughout Advent lead us to think about the function of time and of how God is at work in our world. We're to live as God's people, doing God's work, not allowing ourselves to be consumed by the ways of the world. This is a radical, counter-cultural message that strips the cultural holiday season of everything cute, sentimental, and commercial.

We're challenged to live into our baptismal identity, to be the church, and to be awake and alive. We're to prepare ourselves to receive the best gift imaginable, the gift of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh that transcends time, always fresh, new, and unexpected. Therefore, let us live into that reality with all its mystery, all its wonder, and all its discomfort. Let us look for the unexpected: watch, wait, and most of all be awake.

Christ is coming.

Christ is here.

Christ is already at work in the world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.