

## 1 Sermon, November 28, 2010

Texts: Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

Title: "Holy Expectation"

The scriptures for today are ones that I don't usually care to preach on. You see, it's usually the Christian extremists that get all excited about these texts about Jesus coming again. You know the ones you really don't want to get into an argument with, because they've got all the answers?

But maybe I *should* preach on these scripture readings, because Jesus says plainly that you won't know in advance when the Son of Man comes, nobody can predict it. And the Christian extremists are always trying to predict it.

Maybe the other reason I don't like to preach about these texts is that they don't exactly resolve anything.

The point is: Jesus is coming again. Be awake. Be ready.  
And so what do I do?

When company is coming over, I know what to do. I sweep the floors, I help Marianne get the meal together. I neaten and straighten.

But when Jesus is not just a friend guest coming to my house. If Jesus is coming again, how do I get ready?

I know what to do if a police car comes up behind me with the lights flashing. I get out my driver's license, and I politely wait for the word of doom, or the word of forgiveness.

But Jesus is not just some kind of cosmic cop who is ready to nab me when I stray off the straight and narrow. How do I get ready for Jesus?

Well, the scripture readings give a couple of clues. Paul's letter to the Romans tells us to keep awake. Behave properly, as unashamed people, not people sneaking around at night.

Now is the time to expect something to happen.

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The reading from Romans tells us that the time is now. And that is not just a scare tactic. The time is always now. Now is the time to invest yourself in the love of God. Now is the time to do good to your neighbor. Now is the time to claim and proclaim your faith.

That's good advice whether or not Jesus is coming again soon in the clouds to redeem all humanity.

In the Matthew reading, Jesus speaks of the Son of Man coming to judge the people. We won't know by outward signs who is righteous and who is not.

That's another piece of practical advice. Don't judge a book by its cover. Don't judge other people. Leave that to God.

Another aspect of the Matthew reading is that Christ comes in the midst of our ordinary daily work. Jesus refers to men in the field, and women grinding grain. Ordinary things at that time.

So it is, that Jesus comes to us in the midst of our ordinary lives, while we're doing what we always do, Christ makes love known to us.

Put that all together, and you could say that the scriptures tell us that now is the time to do good to everyone, because we aren't the ones to judge the good from the bad, and we should do good in ordinary things. Now is the time to love God.

How's that for interpretation?

I've managed to take a couple of somewhat frightening passages and make it into a bland statement about doing good. Nobody's going to disagree with that!

But, of course, there's more to it.

Judgment is a real part of these scripture readings.

And that word of judgment is supposed to scare you into behaving better. The more Jesus' second coming is real to you, the more you are likely to be nervous about it.

Unfortunately, being scared may change our behavior for the better, but it doesn't change our character for the better. Being scared will make us wary, and careful, and less willing to take risks. Being scared will give us high blood pressure, or maybe make us superstitious. But it won't change our character for the better.

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Instead, it is confidence and love and trust that change our character for the better. Confidence and love and trust make us stronger inside, better able to cope with what's outside. The love of God gives us confidence and trust.

But if we simply believe in a God of love, who loves us no matter what, then what's the motivation to change? If God loves us regardless of what we do, what makes us want to be more faithful, be more loving and giving?

Here's my answer.

If we see the possibility for greater joy, for greater freedom in Christ, then we will be motivated to want to *grow into* that greater joy and greater freedom.

If we expect that Christ's coming again will increase our sense of marvelous possibilities, then our *expectation* will change our character for the better. We will serve God and love our neighbor, because we expect great things to come from it, things we have not yet experienced.

With that sense of expectation, Jesus is not the cosmic cop, nor the important guest that everything has to be perfect for. With that expectation, Jesus is a great inviter, who, with a hint of laughter, welcomes us to a world shot full of the glory of God. Not yet perfect, not by a long shot, but a world in which the grace of God is operating all the time.

This is the first Sunday of Advent, the season when we prepare for the coming of Christ. And most of the focus of Advent is on Christ's first coming, coming as an infant savior, himself a promise of hope. Advent looks toward a child of great potential, who will change many people for the better.

There is great Good News in this. We know that Christ has already come, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We know that when he rose and ascended into heaven, he left part of himself behind. He left his teachings, his methods, his example.

You and I are the body of Christ. We celebrate that every Communion Sunday. We are the living embodiment of the savior, as we seek to live our Christian lives.

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And that means that whenever another person is baptized into the faith, Christ has in some measure come again. --Not in the sense of a final judgment, not in that end-of-time sense.

But if Jesus truly saved the world on the cross, we are in some senses already saved. We are already holy. We are already children of the day, who do good in the daylight, instead of sneaking around at night. God has already given us grace upon grace.

Scholars call this "realized eschatology," and it is probably a *more* radical concept than the end-of-the-world kind of eschatology.

Realized eschatology means that Christ is already here! And at times it takes great faith to see Christ at work in the world right now. Christ is at work in the war in Afghanistan? Christ is at work in the Tea Party movement? Christ is at work in the growing gap between rich and poor? Christ is at work in the conflict heating up between North and South Korea?

How is that possible? It's a real leap of faith.

But every time a person follows Christ's example and speaks out for justice, Christ is there.

Every time a courageous person steps out into a conflict to make peace, Christ is there.

Every time a father conveys a blessing to his child, or a mother faithfully negotiates the tightrope between caring for her child, and letting them be who God calls them to be – well, then Christ is there.

Every time a person acts selflessly to preserve a resource for others, Christ is there.

Every time unconditional love is expressed, Christ is there.

*That* is realized eschatology.

Paul's letter to the Romans tells us to be awake, awake to the fact that the Lord is coming. And it's not just a matter of being awake to Christ coming from outside us in final judgement.

It's also a matter of being awake to Christ coming to us in the people around us, even in ourselves. It's being awake to the possibility that Christ may use us in a way we never expected. It is being awake to the fact that we live not just in the present moment, but at a hinge

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point in history. For we may, with our faithfulness, change something for the better that will alter history forever.

The time is now. The time is now for evil to be exposed, for darkness to come to light. The time is now, in our ordinary lives, to be part of what Christ is doing. The time is now to make the kingdom of God just a little more real for the people around us.

The time is now.

As the Message translation of the Bible puts it:

Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Romans 13:11-14 (Contemporary English Version)

11 You know what sort of times we live in, and so you should live properly. It is time to wake up. You know that the day when we will be saved is nearer now than when we first put our faith in the Lord. 12 Night is almost over, and day will soon appear. We must stop behaving as people do in the dark and be ready to live in the light. 13 So behave properly, as people do in the day. Don't go to wild parties or get drunk or be vulgar or indecent. Don't quarrel or be jealous. 14 Let the Lord Jesus Christ be as near to you as the clothes you wear. Then you won't try to satisfy your selfish desires.

Romans 13:11-14 (The Message)

11-14 But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!

Matthew 24:36-44 (The Message)

36 "But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows.

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37-39"The Arrival of the Son of Man will take place in times like Noah's. Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing—until the flood hit and swept everything away.

39-44"The Son of Man's Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind. So stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up.

Matthew 24:36-44 (Contemporary English Version)

36No one knows the day or hour. The angels in heaven don't know, and the Son himself doesn't know. [α] Only the Father knows. 37When the Son of Man appears, things will be just as they were when Noah lived. 38People were eating, drinking, and getting married right up to the day that the flood came and Noah went into the big boat. 39They didn't know anything was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man appears. 40Two men will be in the same field, but only one will be taken. The other will be left. 41Two women will be together grinding grain, but only one will be taken. The other will be left. 42So be on your guard! You don't know when your Lord will come. 43Homeowners never know when a thief is coming, and they are always on guard to keep one from breaking in. 44Always be ready! You don't know when the Son of Man will come.

Aware of what's happening around you  
Alive to the possibilities  
Expecting the Lord – looking to see God's finishing touches  
Living in a way that you won't be ashamed of.  
Out of your pajamas & into your day clothes  
Keeping your flashlight handy

Think about what happens when you hear a strange sound at night. You are instantly awake.  
There's a bat in the room!