

Matthew 24:36-44

‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then 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. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

We’ll Never Be Prepared**Rev. Charles Schuster****December 2, 2007**

I had one of the members of the bell choir tell me this morning that they needed two more weeks on that piece. I thought they did a really fine job on everything I’ve heard them do. I, on the other hand, could use two more days on this sermon.

Friday I visit the hospitals. That’s my day. Reverend Everhart assigns us a day to visit the hospitals. Friday, if you’re in the hospital, if I can find you, you’re mine. I afflict the afflicted with comfort. This Friday, most of the congregation was in the hospital. Often, at the very end of the week, there are very few, and sometimes no one from the church. You go to the volunteer desk, and they hand you what’s called the gray book, which is white, and you look through it, and you get your directory out there, and you see if you can find names of members of the church, and often, as I said, on Friday there aren’t any of our people there and I give the book back, and they’ll say something like, “Well, you don’t have anybody to visit today,” and I say, “No, I’m a Methodist pastor and our people are too mean to get sick.” And sometimes they laugh at that, and sometimes they don’t. Maybe it’s because they know you, or because they know me. Anyway, Friday I’m at the hospital trying to find Methodists, and I’m on the fifth floor, and I pass this hospital employee, a nurse, an orderly, a doctor, an administrator, I don’t know, and he’s got a clipboard, and I got the church directory, and after we pass each other we speak, and he says, and this is true, I don’t make these things up, he says, “The Lord is coming, the Lord is coming.” And I said, “Yikes.”

It's Advent, and there are things you can count on this time of year, and it's important I think to confess it. It's a wonderful time, I mean, there are cards and parties and places to go and people to get together with and shopping and fun and things happen this time of year that don't happen any other time. But let's get real. Yikes. There's another side to Advent. It's the dark side. It's a time when there are pressures. It's a time when expectations sometimes outstrip reality. And for some of us, it's a time of sadness. Some of us have to fight through loss, and a lot of us have been through this. It's a difficult time of year. Yikes. For some, in some families, there are fights and feuds. People don't get along. I think it's the pressure, maybe. Pressures that mount, when what could be harmonious becomes acrimonious. And the fact is, things are moving fast. It's just begun, but it's almost like it's over. The truth is, yikes, no matter how much we prepare, we'll never be prepared. And this morning I invite some thoughts about our preparation for Advent and Christmas, and on some level, to say it, it's a time for preparation. It's a time for which we will never be prepared, and that's the way it's supposed to be.

Jesus said it in the context in Matthew is the second coming, we often read readings like this in Advent, he said the Son of Man is coming, the hour you do not know. Paul the Apostle, he said get sober, stay sober, keep awake. You know what time it is. Yikes. The Lord is coming. Three things to look for, that I hope will help, three things to hold in our minds. First of all, I invite you to look with me for the smile. You will see a smile, maybe, in a place you don't expect, and it may be it's possible you'll be the only one to see it. I saw it this past Tuesday. I saw the smile. At church every Tuesday we prepare ourselves for staff meeting with meditation. We meditate before we go into staff meeting. Don't get me wrong, we have a wonderful group of people on the staff here, but they're all overachievers, every one of the self-directed, each of them management material. It reminds me of a convention of kleptomaniacs – you never know how your pocket will be picked, or by whom. And meditation at 9:00 in the chapel on Tuesday before staff meeting helps. It isn't required, we're invited to attend. It's in the chapel and you can join us if you wish, every Tuesday at nine.

This past Tuesday, the altar was set with two oil candles burning down, and the cross in the middle spiking the center of the table, on the table the open Bible turned to a passage I never read before. Reverend Everhart sets a great table, soft music in the background, Christmas music, I believe, and dim lights. A ceramic statue which I happened to bring here, a ceramic statue on the altar in the chapel with its arms held out, a little like a football referee signaling three points, but on second guess, it's obviously Jesus Christ. And if you look at the statue, because that's it, the face of the statue has no eyes, no ears, no nose, no mouth, it's a faceless Jesus, arms extended, candles burning, music playing. I'm thinking of cosmic things, a piece of paper which we're handed on which is written Mary's Magnificat. Somewhere in the Bible, the New Testament I think, and some Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, I believe, predicting the coming of the Messiah "when to our wandering years," and in a space that's just beyond the chapel, bulldozers, Bobcats, excavators, terminators, heavy equipment, digging dirt, pushing dirt around, building a columbarium. And a dozer, cold steel dozer, rammed the chapel. Rammed it. Accidentally, of course. I think. No harm, no worry. And I glanced at the ceramic Jesus, his hands outstretched, faceless Jesus, and I thought I saw it on the faceless face, I didn't

see eyes, I didn't notice a nose, but I did see a smile. A smile. Not a sinister sneer of the Jesus when he turned over the tables in the temple with the moneychangers, not that kind of smile, just the kind of smile that a shepherd would have if the shepherd found a lost sheep. A smile that said, "The Lord is coming." Chaos- impending, yikes-expressing, that said, "Find calm, Chuck, in the chaos." In the words of Tom Peters, "Listen while you can, so you can lead when you must." Or the words of Margaret Self, "To wait in wisdom is to wait into a state of readiness." And I thought of our church trying to do something for those who want to honor those loved ones of theirs, and that's good, and in the same period of time having this Advent workshop so they can get all the kids together to prepare for Advent by the craft items. I thought about our church and all we're trying to do and the smile that said, "You'll be ready when you learn to just be, to just be in the moment, just be calm in the chaos" I hope you see the smile, somewhere, during Advent.

But if you don't see the smile, maybe you'll see the wink in the eye. Advent has a wink in the eye, somehow, somewhere. Jesus said it, he said to his disciples, "Follow me. Do you follow me? The Son of Man is coming and you never know the hour." And Paul said it, "Get sober, stay sober, keep awake. You know what time it is." And Advent winks at us and says to us, "It isn't what you think it is." When you look out at life, it isn't what you think it is. It isn't how it looks, but keep thinking, and don't stop looking, don't get lost in the trappings and forget the essence. Don't get diverted by the shape of the box or the color of the wrappings, to overlook what's inside, metaphorically, of course. There's a wink in the eye to Advent, somewhere. It says to us, "Things are not what they seem."

Rick Reilly is a *Sports Illustrated* writer, he's also the author of the Nothing But Nets program that we've tried to support, to stop malaria in Africa. He wrote in a column this week, he said one of the most interesting moments for him as a witness to sports history was not what it seemed to be. It was after the Broncos won their first Superbowl. It happened in the locker room. Reilly reports on the event. He writes, "I could hear John Elway whooping and hollering alone in the shower, and I said to this old guy sitting on the bench beside me, I said to him, after all these years getting so close, after all the pressures put upon him, not winning the Superbowl but almost getting there, being in the Superbowl and not winning, listen to Elway, after all those years. Do you hear that? That's the sound of redemption. That's the sound of a primal joy." And the old man shrugged his shoulders and looked at me and said, "No, that's not it, we just ran out of hot water."

Things are not what they seem. There's a wink in the eye at Advent. Karen S is a pastor in Minnesota. She remembers a Christmas Eve her grandmother took her to church, she was a child then. "My Grandma was a member of the Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Fergus Falls, Minnesota and one Christmas Eve their service ended, I was with her and there was time to attend the last part of the evening celebration at a nearby Lutheran church, she being a member of the Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Grandma and I merely intended to watch from the back of the church but an usher insisted that we be brought up front, and the usher was surprised when my grandmother said to him, "Oh no, thank you, I just have been to Bethlehem." Things are not what they seem. Advent is a reminder that the most powerful force in the world is not a bomb going off, but the cry of a baby. That

the richest person in Bethlehem was not the census taker in the executive suite, but the homeless couple who slept with the animals, and their son who was called the Lord of Lords, King of Kings. That what we sometimes call reality is so confusing that the only way to sort it out, this time of year, is to pay attention to the divine mystery. And the wink that reminds us when we're sad, that we're close to God, who cares, and when we're worried, that there's something God wants us to give up, let go of. Things are not what they seem. There's more depth to the colored lights. There's more to hear than what we can read in the Gospels, and things are not what they seem. They're better. Always, they're better than what they seem. The wink of the eye in Advent, things are not what they seem. The smile on the lips in Advent, the calm in the chaos. If you witness neither of these, I hope, maybe, maybe not the wink or the smile, but you get to Christmas and you and I suffer post-partum despair when it's over, perhaps, it comes and it goes and we miss it, I hope you see the nod from his head, so we don't get depressed because it didn't live up to our hopes. Sometimes it doesn't. Yikes. The Lord is coming. Jesus said you don't know when, the hour. Paul said, keep awake, you know what time it is. The nod from his head, it comes, it goes, but it never goes away.

This morning we're coming to the table in the reenactment of the Last Supper. There are things that strike me as interesting this time of year, and important. The last three churches I've been planted in by a bishop, every one of them had done something I thought was strange, I never really understood, and it's taken me sixty-three years to figure this out, and I figured it out this week. The question is, why is it necessary, why do people want to have Communion on Christmas Eve? We've done it here for the last three or four years, people ask for it, so we do it, eleven o'clock service on Christmas Eve. One year I dropped half the loaf of bread onto the floor and kicked it under the Christmas tree so nobody'd notice. Did you see that? But why Christmas? On Christmas Eve, why do we celebrate Communion? Joseph and Mary probably didn't have Communion that night, I'm guessing, I mean, I can't imagine it. I've never known who after having had a baby was ready for a sacramental event. I have known some husbands who were stupid enough to suggest it. But Communion is important on Christmas Eve, and here's how I discovered why. It calls back to that time when Jesus met with his friends for what he knew to be the final time, and that would carry a sense of fear, you would think, and grief and a sense of despair that it was all over, but you don't see panic and sadness and fear, you don't witness tears in Jesus' eyes. What you see is a nod to his friends, you see him telling them and eventually they got it, and eventually we get it. He's nodding, it's clear. I think he realized there'd be other occasions when there'd be a meal given and received in his name. If we look closely, we see him nod his head toward us. It's being done in a way that's permission-giving, and he's saying to us, "This is my body, this is the cup of the Covenant, my blood," and he's saying to us, "Carry on, it isn't over. Carry on, it's just beginning." In that way, Communion is appropriate on Christmas Eve because it reminds us to keep it going, the spirit of Christmas.

Edmund Carpenter said, "Electricity has made angels of all of us." Teilhard de Chardin said, "A presence, his presence, is never mute." I like that. At the table, Jesus nods at us. Fred Craddock thought about this. He said, "You know, the first Sunday of Advent," he said, "I'm feeling good about Christmas. The baby's not born yet, Mary's not even in

labor. But it's Christmas already because of Joseph. God said to Joseph in a dream, "I want you to marry Mary. I want you to go ahead and marry her. I want you to take care of her. I've chosen you to help raise her boy." Christmas Eve," Craddick said, "has already started because I know that when Jesus was born, the man who would teach him and raise him and care for him and show him how to be a carpenter and take him to the synagogue and teach him the Bible and teach him his lessons, is a good person, and he would do right. And when you have someone like that," Craddick said, "it's already Christmas, and when Christmas is over, the spirit of that continues. Christmas will last as long as God can find in every community one person who says, "I will do what is right." And what is right is to read the Scripture and to read the human condition in the light of the love and grace and kindness of God. What is right is to find calm in the chaos and to know that things are not what they seem, or as Madelyn L'Engle said, that the God we believe in teaches us through the impossible. And the baby smiles at us and Advent winks at us and Christ nods at us, and Christmas comes, and Christmas never ends, because in every community there's someone like Joseph who says, "I will do what is right," and as long as there's one in every community, it'll be Christmas beyond Christmas. And the question is whether or not your or I or both of us or all of us, will be that person this year. Yikes.