

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT | SERMON

Isaiah 2:1-5 | Matthew 24:36-44 | The Rev. Catherine Healy | St. Paul & the Redeemer

Several years ago, a *New Yorker* writer asked all her colleagues, "If you had just one day left, what book would you read?" She writes:

"I received only three responses . . . Everyone else felt that if it were their last day on earth, they would not spend it with a book, which suggests that we all need to examine how we spend our days when we don't think the world's coming to [an] end."¹

It may seem strange to think about the end of days as we begin Advent, a time whose entire purpose is to prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of Jesus. Outside the walls of the church, we inhabit something called the "Christmas season," with its focus on shopping and Santa. But here, we are in the Advent season, which offers a strange counterpoint. Secular Christmas tells us to indulge; Advent tells us to abstain and repent. Secular Christmas says, "Only 24 shopping days left!"; Advent says, "You do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

In the secular understanding, Christmas is cheerful and sanitized. The coming of Jesus is a happy event.

Advent makes the coming of Jesus feel like the end of the world.

And just when we're getting ready to enjoy the image of Jesus as a babe in arms, instead we have to face up to this terrifying passage from the Gospel of Matthew.² It's hard to know what we're supposed to take away from it. Aren't we supposed to be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage?³ Isn't that what normal people do?

Since the earliest days of the Christian faith, there have been ascetics who have taken Jesus' words to mean that, in fact, awaiting his return means giving all of those things up. This movement picked up steam in the third century with the desert mothers and fathers, who formed monastic communities characterized by celibacy, fasting, and prayer. This was their answer to the warning: "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."⁴

But none of us are desert monastics. Most of us are not in a position to drop everything and pursue a cloistered life. Instead, we are people who go to the grocery store and worry about bills and try to get a

¹ Macy Halford, "[If the World Doesn't End, Can We Sue? A Rapture Roundup](#)," *The New Yorker*, 20 May 2011.

² The first Sunday of Advent is the official beginning of the church year. We are entering Year A of the three-year [Revised Common Lectionary](#) cycle of readings, which means you will

get to hear a lot more from Matthew over the next year. (Year B focuses on the Gospel of Mark, Year C on Luke, and John is sprinkled throughout all three.)

³ Matthew 24:38.

⁴ Matthew 24:44.

glimpse of the holy somewhere in the middle of our endless Christmas to-do lists.

The issue at hand is not what the words of Jesus meant for someone else a long time ago, but what they mean for us.

"About that day and hour no one knows."⁵ In Advent, we prepare for the first coming of Jesus, which changed the world forever. These readings warn us that we should also prepare for the second coming, which will do the same.

And I don't know what the second coming will really be like. I don't know what to make of all this language about the eschaton. I do know that lately, every time I read another report on the intensifying effects of climate change—or every time I read the morning news—I start to wonder if this is what it looks like to live in the end times.

So what could it look like to live eschatologically, as though our time really is getting short? Advent doesn't offer us answers, but it demands that we ask the question.

Aside from the question of which book I would read, when I think about how I would spend my last day on earth, I feel embarrassed. My ideas are so ordinary: I would call my loved ones. I would try to make amends with anyone I had wronged. I would give extra treats to my cat. I would repent. I would pray.

But maybe it's okay to have ordinary ideas about what really matters. Jesus is speaking to ordinary people, then and now. And what really matters turns out to be the same for most of us in the end.

Thinking about what you would do with your last day on earth feels a bit like a thought experiment. But on a larger scale—really, not so much larger a scale—Jesus is asking what you want to do with your one and only life.

You might have eighty more years. You might have one more day. Either way, it's really not a lot of time.

It could be that we really are in the end times. Or it could be that all times have felt like the end times.

And yet the coming of Christ into our broken world is a hopeful thing, the light shining in the darkness. The promise we hear in Isaiah is that ultimately, war and suffering will come to an end, and all people will walk in the ways of the Lord.

No single one of us can force all the nations to beat their swords into plowshares. But the Advent of Jesus is a reminder that small decisions do matter. Over the coming weeks, we'll hear stories of relational moments that at the time surely seemed small. Mary's embracing of her pregnancy. Joseph's willingness to trust her. Elizabeth giving comfort to a young relative who was pregnant and afraid.

So as we enter into this time of expectation and hope, remember that it is also a time of reform and repentance. A chance to pick up the phone or write a note and heal old hurts. A chance to look out for the people in our lives who might desperately need us to comfort them, to believe them, to trust them.

A chance, really, to live like we're running out of time.

⁵ Matthew 24:36.