

SERMON
First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2007

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

The superintendent of a large Christian school was concerned about the messiness he found in so many of the classrooms he visited. Papers were often strewn on the floor, and the students' desks were surrounded by clutter.

Feeling strongly that learning could not take place in such an untidy environment, he decided to take action. He decided to choose one classroom for an experiment. He walked into that classroom, introduced himself to the students, and with a smile made them a proposition.

He said, "Your teacher, your principle and I provide a well-equipped classroom for you to enjoy and learn, but we need your help in keeping your desks and the classroom orderly. Many of you have crumpled papers inside your desks with books left open and the pages bent. Often there are pencils on the floor under your desks along with other clutter.

I would like each of you to clean out your desk today and begin this school year determined to keep it clean." He then pulled out a crisp \$100 bill. "One day I will return and inspect your desks, and the person with the neatest desk will be given this \$100 bill.

I won't tell you which day it will be. It will be a surprise. Not even your teacher or the principal will know the day."

The children squealed with excitement and began immediately pulling things from their desk. They filled the trash baskets with crumpled papers. They stacked their books neatly inside their desks and put their pens and pencils in a nice straight line.

Every morning for the first week they all checked their desks to make sure that they were in perfect condition, confident that today would be the day that the superintendent would return.

But the next week, a few of the boys in the class grew weary of the challenge and returned to their former habits. By the third week, several students said, "I doubt if he'll come back at all. He just said that to make us keep our desks clean."

After two months passed, no one in the classroom bothered to keep up their desks. In fact, most of them had forgot all about the superintendent's promise. That is, except for one little girl named Hope.

Every morning, Hope inspected her desk to make sure everything was in proper order. She did this several times a day. For months, she was teased by the other students. "He's not coming back! Why do you keep looking for him? Your stupid for believing that promise anyway."

Nevertheless, Hope remained quiet and kept her desk in perfect condition and waited. Finally, near the end of the school year, there was a knock on the door and the superintendent entered.

Quickly, the students flung open their desks and began frantically to clean them. But the superintendent held up his hand for them to stop. He instructed all of the students to stand beside their desk at attention while he inspected each desk.

One after another, he rejected them for being unkempt. One boy tried giving excuses, but to no avail. Another blamed the teacher for not reminding them. Still another blamed the superintendent for making them wait so long.

Finally, the superintendent arrived at Hope's desk. She confidently displayed her well-kept desk while beaming at the superintendent. After inspecting her desk, he took her by the hand to the front of the classroom and awarded her the \$100 bill.

"Boys and girls," he said kindly, "this girl never stopped believing that I would return. So she kept her desk in perfect order. She didn't need to worry about what day or even what time of day I would arrive, because she was always ready. Always.

Today, we have begun another church year as we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time to look ahead to the coming of Jesus as a babe in a manger. It is also a time for looking ahead for when Christ will come again.

In our Gospel story this morning, Jesus says to his disciples; "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." This sounds very similar to what the superintendent said in the opening story.

In one sense, we are always living in Advent. For as people of faith, we are continually waiting and watching for signs of God. But there are different kinds of waiting. There is the mundane waiting that all of us do. You know, the kind of waiting that wears us down and stresses us out.

We wait standing in line at the grocery store. We wait when we're stuck in traffic. We wait for our name to be called in a crowded doctor's office. I wonder how many hours of our lives are filled with this kind of meaningless waiting? And the problem is, is that with this kind of waiting, there is really nothing that we can do except wait.

Oh, we can read a magazine or something. But these are just things we do to what we call, "kill time." When you think about it, that's really sad that we "kill time," since time is so precious.

And then there is the waiting that includes anticipation and excitement. I doubt that we get excited about getting out of the traffic jam so that we can get to work. Or I doubt if we just can't wait to get called into the doctor's office. But there are things that we wait for with great anticipation and excitement.

Perhaps it is a pregnant mom waiting for the birth of her baby. Maybe it is a young child counting down the days before Christmas. Perhaps it is a senior citizen marking the weeks off the calendar before retirement.

I would call this "active waiting" rather than "meaningless waiting." For we are actively doing things in preparation. A pregnant mom is fixing up a room for her new baby. A young child is putting up Christmas decorations. A soon to be retiring senior citizen is getting finances in order.

With all of the wars, disease, terrorism, violence, and natural disaster that are going on in the world right now, it would be easy for us as Christians to retreat from the world and just think about the joys of heaven. We could just sit around and wait. But Jesus never calls us to do this.

We are to keep vigilant – keep awake. We are to continue to do what God has called us to do.

The story is told that Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew for certain that the world was going to end tomorrow. Without hesitation he replied, “I would plant an apple tree this afternoon.”

You see, Luther was not into speculation about the so-called second coming of Christ or the end of the world. Rather, he focused on what God’s will is for us in the present time. You might ask, “Why would Luther plant a tree today if the world was ending tomorrow? That would seem like a waste of time and energy.”

But Luther believed that what may happen in the future does not excuse us from what God requires of us in the here and now. For Christ is here with us now.

The Reverend Bill Adams of Trinity Episcopal Church in Sutter Creek, California said the following in a sermon one Sunday:

“We so often speak of the Second Coming of Christ... Frankly, I don’t know where we got such terminology. The phrase “Second Coming” does not appear anywhere in Scripture. Scripture proclaims loudly and clearly that the Christ – the very Word of God – was with God and is God. He became flesh in the world – not once – not twice – but eternally.

The inherent problem with a phrase like “Second Coming” is that it carries the implication of not here yet.

But Jesus is not stuck in traffic somewhere. The redeemer of the world wasn’t sent to us with the wrong zip code – delayed until the Postal Department gets their act together. The Word of God is present in everything and everyone – everywhere – right now!

Advent isn’t a season where we hang out for a while until Christmas happens. Advent is a season where we learn once again to be an expectant people. A people who anticipate – a people who read the signs – a people who look painstakingly for the invasion of Christmas everywhere!”

Advent calls us to live life to the fullest in the here and now. For if you think about it, our eternity has already begun. Think about it.

This very minute is the first minute of our eternal life! The question is how are we going live from this day forward. How are we going to make a difference for the better in the world we live in?

The author of Matthew’s Gospel wastes no time on subtleties, but rather gets straight to the point: “Keep awake!... Be prepared!...

Sisters Maura Clark, Ita Ford, Dorothy Dazel, and laywoman Jean Donovan lived their brief lives fully awake to the great suffering of the people of El Salvador. At times the horror was so overwhelming that the only faithful response they could manage was awakesness itself:

“We did nothing but pray and feel,” recounts Sister Maura. Their vigilance was an act of courage and defiance against a government’s war on its own people. With their eyes awakened, they could not turn away from the suffering.

Despite the terror, the women were inspired and compelled by the hope of the Salvadoran people, and with them, they stubbornly clung to God’s promise of peace when, as we heard in our first reading from Isaiah, “One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train

for war again. For they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.”

Their solidarity with the poor brought the fate of the poor upon them. On December 2, 1980, exactly 27 years ago today, they were raped and killed, sadly by U.S. trained Salvadoran soldiers.

Their example, however, continues to encourage contemporary Christians to know what it means to “keep awake.”

Indeed, Jesus calls us to “keep awake,” to live for today, and to never lose hope. I would like to close with some words by the great theologian Erma Bombeck.

The piece is entitled; “If I Had My Life To Live Over.” It was written after she found out that she was dying from cancer.

“If I had my life to live over, I would have gone to bed when I was sick instead of pretending that the earth would go into a holding pattern if I weren’t there for the day.

I would have burned the pick candle sculpted like a rose before it melted in storage.

I would have talked less and listened more.

I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained, or the sofa faded.

I would have eaten the popcorn in the ‘good’ living room and worried much less about the dirt when someone wanted to light a fire in the fireplace.

I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble about his youth.

I would never have insisted that the car windows be rolled up on a summer day because my hair had just been teased and sprayed.

I would have sat on the lawn with my children and not worried about grass stains.

I would have cried and laughed less while watching television and more while watching life.

I would never have bought anything just because it was practical, wouldn’t show soil, or was guaranteed to last a lifetime.

Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy, I’d have cherished every moment and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was the only chance in life that I had the opportunity to assist God in a miracle.

When my kids kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, ‘Later. Now go get washed up for dinner.’ There would have been more ‘I love you’s.’ More ‘I’m sorry’s.’

...But mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute... look at it and really see it... live it... and never give it back.

Stop sweating the small stuff. Don’t worry about who doesn’t like you, who has more, or who’s doing what. Instead, let’s cherish the relationships we have with those who DO love us. Let’s think about what God HAS blessed us with.

And what we are doing each day to promote ourselves mentally, physically, emotionally, as well

as spiritually. Life is too short to let it pass you by.

We only have one shot at this and then it's gone. I hope you all have a blessed day.

In memory of Erma Bombeck who lost her fight with cancer.

Advent calls us to keep awake. Remember the past; live in the present; and hope for the future. For Christ is our past, our present and our future. He is Emmanuel; God with us. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.