

Matthew 24:36-44 Being Ready

Our scripture readings this morning seem to focus on two aspects of the Advent season. Both of them connected to the theme of Hope expressed within the circle of the Advent wreath. It is with this theme that we enter the Advent season. The Advent wreath is full of symbolism which we sometimes overlook: like the fact that the candles of each week of preparation form a circle around the Christ candle which is the source of and the connection between all that we believe; both about the promise fulfilled in the past and the promise which is yet to be fulfilled. The passage from Isaiah clearly speaks of hope to a people who are threatened. They are facing the might of the Assyrian army. This early portion of Isaiah often carries with it a message of judgment which is understated but present in this particular passage. The nation of Israel has strayed from their covenant promises. We often focus on the image in the later portion of the passage: that beating of swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks and not learning war any more. This last image is featured in a gospel song titled "Down by the Riverside" which I have always loved. In the song all the negative aspects of life's burdens and the brokenness of the world are laid down at the riverside. This is sometimes viewed as what happens at death with the crossing of the River Jordan image; sometimes it is pictured as happening at baptism when Christ comes into a life. In the Isaiah passage we see that this is going to happen when the Word of the Lord comes and "he shall judge between the nations and arbitrate for many peoples." What we often overlook is that same "many peoples" phrase also appears in verse 3: "Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.'" There is a connection between transformation of the broken world into the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah's vision. That connection is the Word whose ways the people seek to learn and then follow. The vision of hope within Isaiah remains: the vision that we are to both participate in and look toward to with hope. When we look at the brokenness of the world around us and listen to those who claim that they can fix it, we need to remember just who is capable of that alteration in the world. There are many cries of doom echoing throughout our society today. Few if any of them are framed in terms of Jesus' return and the corresponding judgment and redemption. Most of these cries of doom come with calls and admonishments for us to save ourselves. We seem to lack confidence that God is at work. We often equate God's providence with history. This is a tempting fallacy when history is going in the direction which pleases us. The flip side is that it leads to despair when things are not going so well in our opinion. As Christians, we need to avoid this heresy that God's will and ours line up neatly. Scripture tells us that God's ways are not our ways, after all. And isn't that a relief considering how we like to judge and how unforgiving we tend to be with our judgments. Acknowledging that God's providence is bigger than our disappointments and our hopes frees up the energy we spend on angst and allows us to put it forth in preparing to welcome our Savior. As our passage from Matthew affirms, we do not know the hour and day that Christ will return, but we can be certain the time is always right to do the right thing; to be ready. The opening verse of our gospel passage comes near the end of the Matthew's gospel narrative—not the beginning where we are told how Jesus' birth came about and how it fulfilled the promise given earlier. And it is clear that at this point that Jesus is not speaking about his

nativity but about that day Isaiah spoke about much earlier. That day when Isaiah said the Word will come and judge between the nations. Jesus describes that day this way: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” I seem to hear the echo of a phrase used in a childhood game: “Ready or not, here I come.” Although the context is different, the phrase tells us two things which are also true of this passage. The passage continues with warnings that because the time is unknown by anyone other than the Father, what is important is being awake, being prepared, being ready, whenever that day may come. The passage ends with a similar thought: “Therefore you also must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. There are two themes which dominate this passage from Matthew. The first is the sure and certain promise that God’s future and our future belong to this Messiah, the son of Man. Within the passage the promise of his coming is repeated three times—at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. This theme of promise is a recurring refrain: Here I Come. The second theme is the emphasis placed on the uncertainty of the timetable for the return. This concept is mentioned five times, verse 36, 39, 42, 43 and 44. We do not like uncertainty in our lives so this creates a challenge for us. This dislike of uncertainty creates a danger because we want answers to our questions about Christ’s second coming—the When?, How?, Why?, and How can I know?. Yet it seems very intentional that we are not given the answers to these questions. Unfortunately this leads either to disbelief and despair or wild speculation and fears based on assumptions that we can figure out what only God knows. Because of this tendency the beginning of the new liturgical year and the sounding of the Advent trumpet with its themes of “coming” may then only fall on ears and hearts that are numbed by the “same-old, same-old.” We sometimes think, “Well here we go again; so what’s new?” Has anything really changed?” we ask. The problem for us is the sameness, the routine of it all—whether the routine is good or bad. This gospel lesson balances the surety of the promise of the coming of the Son of Man—the promise of God’s nearness to our world and our lives with the not knowing, the mystery, the whens and whys that mark our lives in the meantime. We are called to be awake, not just for what is to come at some unknown point in time, but to continuous preparedness for what is already taking place in our midst. Our danger is that we will be lulled to sleep in the seeming sameness or disappointing news of the world around us. When this happens, our failure is in not knowing the significance of this and each particular day—that we are to be aware that each day is lived in the promise of the Lord’s nearness. The Son of Man is coming and you must be ready. This means seeing the mystery and promise of the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary routines of life or even in those disastrous events that make God’s presence so difficult to envision. We need to envision the world as shaped by God’s promises and seek to participate in the bringing of that vision near. You probably have realized how much I enjoy the poetry of Ann Weems, so it won’t surprise you that I think one of her poems is a good illustration of how to be ready for Christ’s return. It is called “Feeding Sheep”. He said, “Feed my sheep.” There were no conditions: Least of all, Feed my sheep if they deserve it. Feed my sheep if you feel like it. Feed my sheep if you have any leftovers. Feed my sheep if the mood strikes you. If the economy’s OK...if you’re not too busy...No conditions...just, Feed my sheep.” Could it be that God’s kingdom will come which each lamb is fed? We who have agreed to keep covenant are called to feed sheep even when it means the grazing will be done on our own front lawn.” It

seems to me that she has put her finger on what we will find as we journey through Matthew's gospel account with its extended passages on the teachings of Jesus as found in the Sermon on the Mount and in other places. We are called to be in a caring community while we live in this in-between time of Jesus' life on earth and the coming of Christ at some point in the future. His coming is sure despite the lack of a timetable. So we need to be ready by living as his called disciples: because at some point we will hear Christ calling "Ready or not, here I come." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.