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Church of the Holy Spirit
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Matthew 24:36-44

I want to take back what I said last week, about Advent being a time of hopeful expectation. Because in this Gospel lesson, and in our contemporary world, there seems to be a lot of discussion around the end times. Not just in the lectionary, even though Jesus did teach about the Temple being destroyed last week, indicating the end of the world as the disciples knew it, but in our contemporary world too. With another prediction of the "rapture" just a few weeks back in September, which did not come to pass, and most of us having survived no less than 12 predicted apocalyptic events since the turn of the century, it seems appropriate to take any prophecy about the end of the world with a bit of skepticism.

After all, there hasn't been a worldwide flood in 2000+ years since Jesus' life. It is equally unlikely that there was an actual worldwide flood approximately 2000+ years before that, which is when Noah would have lived, according to scripture. It makes sense that just as we don't need to worry about a world-destroying flood, neither would we, by extension, need to be concerned about people being "taken" into paradise in the middle of the workday. Yet, here we are at the beginning of a new church year, a new season of preparation and expectation. We have this narrative which compels us to stay awake, because the Son of Man is coming, like a thief, at an unexpected hour.

Being prepared is one thing. Staying awake is another. This is one of the times in scripture when Jesus seems to be set against his disciples' desire for a solid 8 hours of rest.

Jesus really does seem to have something against sleep (unless he's napping during a storm, he keeps telling the disciples not to fall asleep). Unless, it is a rhetorical tool Christ uses as a metaphor for the community to be aware that the world around them is about to change. Today's Good News doesn't seem to fit with what I said last week about Advent being about Jesus' birth, Mary's pregnancy, Isaiah's prophetic messages, or preparing the way for Christ, does it?

However, Jesus' lesson is steeped in the tradition of oral retelling of prophecies recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. The story of "The Great Flood" in Genesis provides a foundation for the recitation of the prophecies from the likes of Daniel, Isaiah, and Zechariah. All of which include allusions to the history, wisdom, and the prophetic messages that Jesus' disciples would have known without needing much of a reminder.

Jesus gives them a first-century version of Cliff's Notes to jostle their memory and remind them that life is, in fact, turbulent, full of change, and unpredictable. Reminding faithful people they have been through difficult times before, and as they had in the past, they would remain beloved by God, who would accompany them through trials and tribulations. They remain God's chosen people. Their role in the covenantal relationship with God is to stay engaged, not to take it for granted or become lax in their observance, forgetting who and whose they are.

What we hear Jesus describing sounds an awful lot like what, in our modern parlance, we might call the "End times"." While religious texts often inspire science fiction, dystopia, or cautionary tales, as portrayed in literature, film, or other media, many of the images, ideas, and concepts in our culture,

such as rapture, are not actually based on Biblical teachings.

American exceptionalism is at the root of this interpretation of scripture. It seems to be the hope of some of our fellow Americans to be the few, the proud, the raptured - which is counter to God's desire for all of humanity to be reconciled one to another, to God and to all of the other aspects of creation- which is described over and over again in scripture, in our creeds, and traditions which have transcended centuries, seas and seasons of trial and tribulation beyond record.

Until about 200 years ago, the belief that some would be taken to heaven while others would be left behind was not a commonly held view. This idea can be traced back to the 19th-century work of John Nelson Darby. Darby didn't even have the idea himself; instead, he wrote his notes in what is now called "The Scofield Reference Bible," taking liberties with Margaret Macdonald's visions. This young Scotswoman in the 1830s told about a vision she had of the Church being "taken away" before the time of tribulation. This concept of being taken caught like wildfire in The United States of America, where the notion of the "elect" had taken root.

So what is Christ saying if it is not advocacy for doomsday preparation, sleep deprivation training, or exceptionalism? What does Jesus mean when he teaches the disciples to stay awake, be prepared, and expect the thief to break in and steal at an unexpected hour? The underlying message that Jesus is reminding his disciples of is that God is the God of surprises. That there is nothing new under the sun.

While there is a sense of consistency and normalcy in our daily lives, the sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes,

tomorrow will come. In reality, God put the patterns to stars and planets to their courses and can redefine everything that is and was and will be.

It is our invitation as faithful followers of Christ, to believe in God and remember that. Keeping one another mindful that God loves us and has created a harmonious creation. Yet, there will be times when homeostasis cannot and will not be maintained.

This is what Advent is about expecting the unexpected. While anxiety is not necessary, being observant, aware, and using the gifts of memory, reason, and skill to recognize that what we know now, may no longer be true tomorrow.

This requires a certain amount of recognition of ignorance and prejudice, and of admitting when we have gone astray. Most most Christians recognize that the Church (institutionally at least) hasn't always been great at doing that. People prefer constancy to change, and faith to fact, despite their ability to learn, grow, and adapt. Consider how scientific discoveries have historically been received, debated, or denied. It was only in 1992 that John Paul II absolved Galileo of his "sins" more than 350 years after excommunication. When we consider why Jesus is telling his followers to remain awake and aware of the past, we ought to keep our own faults in mind. Because those who do not learn from history, are bound to repeat it, right?

Jesus' teachings echo those of the prophets who predated him. Their prophecies serve as the basis for the lessons he teaches the disciples. Accumulative knowledge, and records of experience, wisdom, and myth is part of why we include the Torah as well as the prophets, alongside the teachings of Jesus. And The Bible also contains the

letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles/ By recognizing how far we have come and also how far we have yet to go we consider that perhaps someone 2000 years from now, will find this manuscript and these words will show our children's children's children how we view the relationship between God and humanity.

If we are in a reciprocal relationship with God, then how we interact with the all-powerful, knowing, seeing, and good being matters. It is not our belief that God is a puppet master who plays with us like a child playing with Jacks, some getting scooped up while others are left on the ground. Discerning and loving hearts determine how and when and what will happen in our relationship with the Divine and the beloved creation, along with all of the creatures of this earth.

When our ancestors look back at this moment, they know things we do not, but they will also see that they remain beloved. This is the lesson that underlies Jesus' teaching. Rooted in the mythology that gives meaning to the covenant between God and humankind and all of creation.

Throughout all ages, there have been devastating events in the natural world. Earthquakes, Tsunamis, Volcanic eruptions, as well as storms, fires, and mudslides, to name a few. While many are considered acts of nature, others have human catalysts as well: deforestation, oil and chemical spills, and nuclear disasters, to name a few aspects of human actions that have led to measurable environmental imbalance.

Our great-grandchildren may reconsider, much as we do, the impact our actions have on those around us, the possibility that what could happen may happen, and that we always have the ability to begin again.

Rather than being willfully ignorant of so much of God's eternal nature, we will recognize that by being loved as a species by our creator since the beginning, we live in a blessed position. While we have no concept of what the end of time could really mean, we ought not be surprised by what that love looks like in our lives, and in the lives of those yet to come. We don't know what we don't know, but we do know that we don't know everything, right?

In every generation, human beings need to be reminded of where we have been and where we are headed. Not in order to frighten us, or warn of horrible fates that may befall us at the hands of a manipulative and controlling deity.
But because our futures are tied to our past, our past is likewise connected to the present, and these recurring experiences human beings,
especially those who believe in God
and devote themselves to the knowledge and love of God,
grow in experience, strength, and hope.

These are what inspire Christians through the trials that arise in this and every generation.

It is the awareness that times of uncertainty are inescapable, times of tragedy are inevitable, and even in the shadow of suffering, God is with us. Still in the business of surprising/enlightening the world so that the end of the world as we know it is not something to be feared, but to be prepared for and expected.

Amen