

“Hope for Our Generation”
First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2022
Scripture: Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year. During this season of four weeks ahead of Christmas, Christians are encouraged to spend time preparing our spirits for the birth of Jesus, the coming of light to the world. But why does it matter to us that God becomes human, becomes one of us, in Jesus? And what does that incarnation tell us about God and say about us and who we're meant to be? These are some of the questions we might think about this time of year. But preparing for Jesus' birth isn't the only reason for Advent.

Originally the emphasis wasn't on Jesus' first coming but on his second. That's why we hear passages like this one from Matthew's gospel that look forward to a time when history will come to an end and everything will be made new. It's an expectation that Christians have held for centuries, a source of hope for people who have no other choice. Lately I've been digging into this belief a little bit. You may know there's a branch of Christianity that puts a lot of stock into images like these. They interpret passages like this one from Matthew's gospel as evidence that something called 'the rapture' will occur as an overture to the main event of Jesus' return to take control of the world.

The Bible doesn't actually say that and the expectation many of these people have of some kind of final battle, an Armageddon, isn't described as clearly as they imagine, but it seems to feed some need in them to have a sense of certainty in a world they think is out of their control. And that made sense for people in the first century who followed a religion considered subversive by the government. It's not surprising that marginalized, powerless people would turn to dreams of rescue from the heavens. But we don't live in those circumstances today. Human society has evolved and basic human rights, while they may be ignored in a lot of countries, have become the standard we use to measure the legitimacy of governments.

So, when we hear Paul talk about salvation being near, he probably means that Jesus will be returning soon to overthrow the Roman government. For us, though, his words need to take on new meaning. Rather than putting our hope in Jesus' return in some physical way, we can look at his words as a call to examine our actions in the world. Salvation comes near when we reach out with compassion to those in our world who are rejected or neglected because of their life circumstances. For instance, two weeks ago a terrible shooting occurred in a gay nightclub in Colorado Springs. It was considered the only safe space for LGBTQ people to gather in that city. In the midst of their grief plans for a community Thanksgiving dinner sponsored by the nightclub were called off. But a local church and other organizations stepped in to provide it for them. It was a gesture of kindness and compassion, a reminder that the people whose lives were affected weren't forgotten, and it brought salvation near.

When people live in fear, when they have no political or social power, their only hope lies in forces outside themselves. They look to the heavens for rescue; they long for escape. But Jesus doesn't seem interested in that alternative. He looks to his followers to change their world and bring hope to the hopeless. Even in this passage in Matthew's gospel where he seems to

describe events we often associate with the second coming, Jesus refuses to give a timetable or a detailed plan. His final word to his disciples is to be alert. They're called to be aware of what's happening around them so they can respond in ways that reveal God's kingdom. Will it really happen that two women will be grinding grain and one will be taken and the other left or two will be working a field and one taken and the other left? And what does all that really mean anyway? Is it about judgment or just the fleeting nature of life? If there is one thing Jesus does emphasize it's the need to act when we can, while we can. In another place in the same gospel he insists to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world."

It could be the job of disciples isn't so much to look to the heavens for hope but to be hope for others. So, our hope doesn't lie in God's action on our behalf but in our capacity to act on behalf of God. Escaping difficulty, as tempting as that is, isn't our purpose. We're meant to face the difficulties and bring hope out of despair. In her book *The Rapture Exposed*, New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing quotes former enslaved woman Sojourner Truth who responded to stories she heard from society women about the promise of escaping the world's destruction. Truth told them, "You seem to be expecting to go to some parlor away up somewhere, and when the wicked have been burnt, you are coming back to walk in triumph over their ashes—this is to be your New Jerusalem!! Now, I can't see anything so very nice in that, coming back to such a muss as that will be, a world covered with the ashes of the wicked. Besides, if the Lord comes and burns—as you say he will—I am not going away; I am going to stay here and stand the fire, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! And Jesus will walk with me through the fire, and keep me from harm."

Jesus' promise to his disciples, at the very end, is, "I am with you always." Hope for our generation lies in our ability to cling to that promise and act with compassion, generosity and justice for the sake of God's people in need. This is why God becomes one of us: Jesus' birth is God's affirmation of us and our capacity for good. We don't need to escape this world. We're here to embrace it, just like God does in Christ. This Advent you're invited to be truly in the world and bring hope to those around you in need, to be fully awake and put on Christ.

Amen