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Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 2: 1 – 5
Romans 13: 11 – 14

Psalm 122
Matthew 24: 36 – 44

British bishop and theologian, N. T. Wright, who lives in an old country house in England, tells a story about a lazy, hot Saturday afternoon one summer. Members of his large family, some of whom were home on holiday, were lounging about the house and gardens. Books and magazines were cast about, mixed in with coffee mugs and newspapers and open packages of sweets and snacks. “Everything,” Wright writes, “had the look of the sort of cheerful untidiness that a large family can create in about an hour.”

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Wright went to the door, dressed as he was in very casual clothes, wondering what friend or neighbor might be calling. As he opened the door, to his horror, there were perhaps 30 or so well-dressed visitors waiting. They had arranged a tour of the historic house months before, but neither Wright nor his family had remembered. Thinking quickly, Wright told the group leader to go visit the gardens first, so as to ‘get a good look at the house from the outside.’ During the next several minutes, he mobilized the family to tidy everything up. Children and pets retreated to bedrooms. Wright opened the front door again and welcomed in the guests.

“You can tidy a house in a few minutes,” Wright comments, “but you can’t reverse the direction of a whole life or a whole culture that fast.” By the time the doorbell rings, it’s too late. And that’s what our lesson from Matthew is trying to tell us on this, the first Sunday in Advent. By the time the doorbell rings, it’s too late. We are to have our priorities right and to be living in a way that anticipates the doorbell ringing at any moment.

It is indeed Advent, hence the color purple for our vestments and hangings. Purple is the color of royalty, but also the color of reflection and repentance. Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, and means ‘coming.’ In Greek, the word is *parousia*. It is the beginning of another year of living with God. A time of preparing for the coming of Christ. A time of watching and being alert. A time of reflection and wonder. A time of repentance and awe. A time of expectation and yearning.

All of which is in such stark contrast with the sparkle and glitz and over-blown consumerism of our cultural Christmas season. All around us is the craziness of shopping and parties and decorations and Christmas cards. Christmas muzak has been filling the airwaves for weeks already. Catalogues stuff our mailboxes, and charities and alma maters beg for end-of-the-year, tax-deductible contributions. Snow people, Santa Clauses and reindeer are everywhere. And into the midst of this, the Church comes in saying, “Hush! The doorbell might ring any moment – be ready.” Because Advent is not just a prelude to Christmas; it is a symphony unto itself. The church season of Advent proclaims the coming of the Lord, but that is not the same as saying that Christmas is coming. Advent is about the most momentous event in human history.

Few if any of us spend much of our time thinking about the end of the world *any* time of the year, but especially now, in this season of merriment and good cheer. These apocalyptic passages make us uncomfortable. In this scientific age, and at a time when war, terrorism and division fill the headlines, we might fear that the world will come to an end because of an environmental disaster or a nuclear war, but not because of the return of Jesus. So Matthew’s Gospel comes as a bucket of cold water on our holiday preparations.

We'd much rather focus on the "God is love" aspect of the Gospels, staying in the past with a romanticized and bucolic scene of a bright, clean stable with gentle, quiet animals, a caring and concerned Joseph, a radiant and ethereal Mary, and a warm, swaddled and cooing little baby, Jesus.

But to focus solely on one night, two thousand plus years ago, when God came into the world in the form of the baby, Jesus, is to see the bark of the tree and not the forest. It is to miss the promise of our God who comes into our world daily and into our lives moment by moment, whether we realize it or not. It is to miss the larger picture of God redeeming the world here and now and on into the future. It is to misunderstand that the coming of Christ brings a new beginning, not an end. For us as Christians, the coming of Christ is "not about an ambush but rather a consummation." (George Montague, *The Living Thought of St. Paul*, p. 24 – 25) It is not a coming *against*, but rather a coming *for*. The coming of Christ is that moment when, finally, the whole cosmos will openly and totally belong to God. (H. K. Ohmig, *Synthesis*, 11/28/04)

With the season of Advent, the church helps us to focus on the present and the future, and not just the past. The Rev. Kate Huey writes that "the past helps us remember who God is and how God acts in the world and in our lives. From the past, we can gain a better understanding of where we are, where we're headed and what the promises of God will bring." But that doesn't mean that the time in between now and the future will be a smooth ride. The growing light of the Advent wreath reminds us that the Light can never be quenched by the darkness. And it also reminds us that God is very present *in* our darkness.

Still, Matthew's Gospel can leave us feeling anxious. Jesus' images of devastating floodwaters, kidnapping and robbery are all very harsh, intrusive, disturbing images with which to begin Advent. But are they so different from our everyday news of the world around us? Thomas Long writes that this passage from Matthew connects that sense of unpredictability with deep human need. "When tomorrow is just more of today," he says, "and all labors of love seem poured into a bottomless pit of human suffering, indifference and cynicism, then it is hard to march out the front door to be a disciple. In the face of the crushing needs of the world, the only way to preserve hope, the only way to maintain a willing sense of discipleship, is to trust that, at any moment, we may be surprised by the sudden presence of God." He continues, "We may never know when we may encounter God waiting for us around the next bend...each unexpected meeting, each moment of holy surprise, is but an anticipation of the great climax of all human history and longing, when the world, seemingly spinning in ceaseless tedium, will find itself gathered into the extravagant mercy of God."

Advent is about waiting and watching. And the way that we wait and watch for something depends in large part by what it is we're waiting for. Whether we are anxious and scared, or whether we are filled with joyful, vigilant, hope-filled anticipation, has everything to do with the expected end of our waiting. Jesus says, "Keep awake!" To be awake or alert means not just passive waiting, but responsible action that corresponds to the nature of the coming kingdom. We are not to sit around, wringing our hands and speculating about when all this might happen. As Christians, we have much more important things to do. Like getting our own priorities right, with God first. Like beating swords into plowshares. Like putting on the armor of light, so that we stop the darkness from piercing our own souls, and we reflect the Light of Christ back into the world. [Kelsey and St. David's, Bean Blossom, IN]

Advent is also about reflection and repentance. Which is just looking realistically at our relationship with God. While we are waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises, we *reflect* on the

ways in which we have veered off onto paths that take us away from God. We *ponder* how can we turn off those things which have drowned out the voice of God in our hearts and our heads. We *contemplate* new ways of living that give hope, not just to us, but to all with whom we share our lives and our world. And then we act on those things.

During the season of Advent, we live into the tension between the darkness and the Light, between the humility of the babe in the manger and the glorious majesty of Christ coming again, between our broken past and our hope-filled future. Advent is always future-oriented. Theologian Peter Gomes writes, "...there *is* a future worth waiting for, worth living and working for, worth praying and dying for, and worth hoping for, for in that future is not more of the same but that of which we have not had enough – God." Hark! The doorbell rings.

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