

Jesus says, "But about that day and hour no one knows."

When I hear these words I feel compelled to think about the days and hours when I did not and could not know about.

- The day and hour I became a father for the first time.
- The day and hour I had to adjust where to propose to Sallie because the blue ridge parkway was closed due to an unusually early snow. She still said yes, twice for good measure.
- The day and hour I found out that I received my acceptance letter to college.
- The day and hour I knelt in front of Bishop McLoughlin and was ordained as a priest.
- The day and hour I became a father for the second time.
- The day and hour you called me to serve as the Curate here at St. John in the Wilderness.
- The day and hour I found out that my dear friend who I was ordained with, twice, had died at the age of 35.
- The day and hour when everything seemed to be going right but I still felt lost and afraid.

The day and hour that we do not and cannot know about come to us in infinitely different ways. It comes to us as an unforeseen gift, an unforeseen loss, an unimagined future, a dream come true. However it comes to us, we have no way of knowing what it would bring. We may do everything imaginable to plan or prepare for what may come, but we live in the midst of uncertainty and unknowing. There are days and hours that catch us completely off guard, that take us completely by surprise, sometimes in beautiful and joyful ways, sometimes painful and difficult ways.

I gave you a list of some of the days and hours that I did not and could not know about so now I wonder what are some of yours? Think about the day and hour that took you by surprise and caught you off your guard? What happened in that hour, on that day that you never expected, or wanted, or could have possibly even imagined?

The day and hour of uncertainty, of not knowing, is what Advent is about. Advent is a season, the first season of the church year, so Happy Thanksgiving and Happy New year everyone. Our church seasons are lenses through which we look upon our lives and the life of the world. Yet, Advent is much more than a season of the church year, Advent describes our life as Christians.

I have heard it said that we are an Easter people, transformed people, and in many ways, we are that, and yet we are also an Advent people. We are in the process of transformation and are thus called to live a life of reflection and preparation and look expectantly for the coming of Christ. Certainly, we look expectantly towards Christmas when we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and also, we look expectantly to the coming of the resurrected Christ. We encounter the resurrected Christ in worship, prayer, the Eucharist and all the sacraments, and in many ways in our lives. And also, we reflect and prepare to meet the resurrected Christ in that day and hour at the end of time when all things will be transformed, redeemed, made new and the kingdom of God is ushered in.

Advent, in Church and in life, begins with the day and hour we do not know about. No one knows how, when, or where that day and hour will come. No one can foresee or predict it, try as they may to look for the signs. Jesus tells us that the day and hour will come like a flood that suddenly rises and sweeps things away, or like a thief in the night.

We have a three year cycle in the Episcopal church that helps us move through scripture in a measured, intentional way. The readings for the first Sunday of Advent were different last year than what we heard today, and will be different a year from now. Yet, whatever year we are in, the gospel for the First Sunday of Advent always seems portentous, menacing, or even threatening. It may seem strange to begin the year by talking about the end of the world. Such a conversation is a stark contrast to the festive decorations, music, and gatherings many people associate with this time of year. But in many ways these texts are a perfectly timed reminder of what is happening and what is coming. Texts like our gospel reading from Matthew today are known as apocalyptic and we often hear them like a Hollywood movie about the end of the world. It can feel like the world is ending when life is so uncertain, when the future is so unpredictable, and when we feel powerless to control what happens next.

Look at the gospel text closely though. Jesus never says the world is ending with a something like our galaxy being sucked into a supermassive black hole. or a cataclysmic asteroid strike.

No, Jesus is not predicting the end of the world, for he says that neither the angels in heaven nor the Son can know when, where, or how the end of days looks like, only the Father knows. I think rather, Jesus is teaching about how to live in the face of transience and changes that cannot be predicted or controlled.

Transience, impermanence, and uncertainty illustrate today's Gospel lesson. It begins with the day and hour that we know nothing about, and it all comes to be at the unexpected hour. Everything in between is about not knowing.

Jesus talks about not knowing over and over. We don't know the day, the part of the night, or the hour when, whatever it is, will happen. What we do know is that whatever it is will happen, and it will likely happen in the regular ordinary normality of life. It will happen when we are eating and drinking, marrying, and burying those whom we love, laboring in our work, or sitting on the porch listening to the last remaining leaves rustle in the wind. Could it be that the apocalypse, whatever, whenever, however that looks like will come at any moment?

And then if the apocalypse, the end of days, the coming of the Son of Man, the Second Coming of Christ, the eschaton, whatever we call it is to come at the unexpected hour, could it be that maybe every day is an apocalypse? Maybe we are always living in apocalyptic times. Maybe we have completely misunderstood what the apocalypse is really all about. Maybe apocalypse is about today and every day rather than some unknown day and hour in the future.

When my beloved tar heels lose in both basketball and football on the same day it feels that way. When I look at the news and see all the violence throughout the world and seemingly closer and closer to home it feels that way. When I consider the immediate and lasting effects of climate change it feels kind of apocalyptic to me.

Uncertainty, not knowing, feelings of powerlessness in the face of chaos seems to surround us like the air we breathe. So maybe apocalypse isn't about the end of the world as much as it is about living in the midst of uncertainty and unknowing, its about living in the midst of the chaos, its about living with the unpredictability of the future prepared to encounter Christ at any possible moment.

So how do we do that? How do we look expectantly towards the moment or moments when we encounter Christ? When we are surrounded by chaos and life seems out of control, when we don't know what to say and even sometimes don't know how to pray, what are we to do? When questions are many, explanations few, the day and hour need be not so much what is in our heads as in our hearts. Are we not called to exist in that deep place where the mystery of God and our own lives meet?

More practically for our own lives the question is less about the apocalypse, the eschaton, the end of the world, and is rather more about how do we live with uncertainty, how do we live without knowing, how do we live without being the ones in power or in control. How do we live faithfully, how do we find our center, our compass in that day and hour? ... This is what Advent is.

The challenge of Advent, of that day and hour that we cannot know or control is to cultivate what poet John Keats refers to as "negative capability." Negative capability is the ability to accept uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

To sustain uncertainty, to live without knowing, to stand in the mystery, to keep questions and possibilities open, to embrace ambiguity, to not be too quick to resolve or shut down doubt, and then, and then, to do all this without running away and trying to escape, without blaming others and justifying ourselves.

Could it be that that is what Jesus is getting at when he calls us to “stay awake” and to “be ready.”

Keep awake and be ready for... what? I wish I knew and could tell you, but I don't, I can't. It's the day and hour about which no one knows. The most I can tell you is to stay vigilant, stay ready, for whatever comes, whatever may unfold.

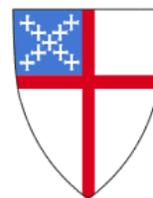
These days and hours are unpredictable, chaotic, unknown, transient, and temporal. The amazing and beautiful part is that none of that diminishes how beautiful and incredible a life of faith is. The capacity to live in the midst of the storm, prepared to encounter Christ whenever, wherever, however, intensifies life, enlightens life, it heightens life's value.

The capacity to live in the daily apocalypse deepens the meaning of life, it opens us to the possibility of the impossible, to life and more life.

Everything matters. Never miss a moment. I remember when I became a father, when Sallie said yes and I do, when I was accepted to the college whose sports teams constantly break my heart, the day I was ordained, the day I was called to become a part of this family at St. John in the Wilderness, when my friend Adam died. I remember all of those times when I felt lost and afraid. I remember them because I know that in all of those hours and days that I could not know or expect what to happen or how to feel, I encountered Christ. Because when we live our lives ready to encounter Christ, whenever, wherever, and however that happens we surely will. So get ready, stay awake, stay vigilant. Christ is coming.

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the First Sunday of Advent

Year A
RCL



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

The Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
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.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob,
 come, let us walk
 in the light of the LORD!

The Psalm

Psalm 122

Laetatus sum

- 1 I was glad when they said to me, *
 "Let us go to the house of the LORD."
- 2 Now our feet are standing *
 within your gates, O Jerusalem.
- 3 Jerusalem is built as a city *
 that is at unity with itself;
- 4 To which the tribes go up,
 the tribes of the LORD, *
 the assembly of Israel,
 to praise the Name of the LORD.
- 5 For there are the thrones of judgment, *
 the thrones of the house of David.
- 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: *
 "May they prosper who love you.
- 7 Peace be within your walls *
 and quietness within your towers.
- 8 For my brethren and companions' sake, *
 I pray for your prosperity.
- 9 Because of the house of the LORD our God, *
 I will seek to do you good."

The Epistle

Romans 13:11-14

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Gospel

Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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