

Sermon for Advent 1, Year A, November 30, 2025
St. Luke/San Lucas Episcopal Church
Preacher: Rev. Lynette Poulton Kamakura
Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44; Psalm 122

In the words of the Psalmist, let us pray to the God of Hope, “We pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May they prosper who love you. Peace be within our walls and quietness within our towers. For our brethren and companions’ sake, we pray for prosperity. Because of the house of the Lord our God, we will seek to do you good.” Amen.

Please be seated.

Happy New Year! Today we enter the season of Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year. This is a season of expectation, of preparation, of hope, getting ready for the big celebration of Jesus’ birth. Busy, yes, but also joyous and filled with wonderful things—hot chocolate, gingerbread houses, caroling, chestnuts roasting by an open fire.

And there are so many special stories about preparations, about the time before Jesus’ birth. We’ve got the angel’s conversation with Joseph, the angel’s conversation with Mary, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, even the start of the Wise Ones’ journey, following that star. So much material to work with.

So, what were the lectionary writers thinking, to give us this passage from Matthew. What happened to joy to the world, peace on earth, good will to man? Instead, we get the flood with all its destruction, Jesus coming at an unexpected hour, references to thieves in the night.

I must admit to having a history with this particular passage. As I’ve shared before, I am not a cradle Episcopalian. I was raised in a different tradition, one where, every summer, we had a revival. For a whole week, we had nightly services, with two-hour sermons by special, invited speakers, lots of music, and plenty of prayer. One year when I was about seven or eight, the theme was “Christ will Come Again.” People from all around the area came to hear the sermons and the music was pretty intense.

Early in the week, the preacher spoke on the passage we have as our gospel today. And he really leaned into the idea that we need to be ready, always ready, because we have no idea when Jesus will come again—and we don’t want to be left behind. He linked this teaching to the parables that follow.

We need to stay awake. We can’t fall asleep or run out of oil like the unprepared wedding attendants. We can’t be paying attention to our own interests instead of God’s, like the servants in the parable that follows. He hit those points hard. Stay awake! Be ready! Or something really bad will happen—Jesus will come and take all His people away, and you’ll be left alone, with all the other people who didn’t believe, who messed up, who fell asleep.

The combination of a very energetic speaker and an impressionable child led to a rather unfortunate outcome. After hearing that message, I was afraid to go to sleep. For some time after that, I would get ready for bed, say my nightly prayers, climb under the covers, and do everything I could to stay awake. I would go over the day in my head, praying for forgiveness for whatever mistakes I could remember. I would sing songs to myself. I would recite my Bible verses. I would make up stories. Anything to stay awake, to be ready.

Of course, the inevitable happened—I fell asleep. But my sleep was disturbed, and I would wake up in a panic, my heart pounding, sure that Jesus had come, that all my family and friends were gone, and that I had been left behind, alone, all because I had fallen asleep. Once I caught my breathe, I would look over to my sister's bed to make sure she was still there. Sometimes, I would even sneak out into the hall to check that my parents were still home. Then, I would climb back into bed and once again try my best to stay awake.

This continued for several days, until the revival ended and we were once again back in our regular Sunday School class. In what can only be seen as a Holy Spirit moment, our lesson was about Jesus telling the disciples to let the little children come to him. As our teacher spoke, I remembered all the other things I had been taught about Jesus, about Jesus' love for, his care for, children. Our songs, "Jesus loves the little children" and "Jesus loves me, this I know." I thought about all the times Jesus took care of people, feeding them, healing them, walking and talking and being with them. About all the times Jesus told those around him, be not afraid.

And in that moment, I realized that I had a problem, not with Jesus, but with some of the teachings that were being presented in Jesus' name. I knew that our gospel passage today was in the Bible, that it had meaning and purpose, but I was pretty sure that purpose wasn't to terrify little children, to keep them awake at night. Jesus, the Jesus of my Sunday School classes, the Jesus who invited kids to come close, the Jesus who loved and served and healed, that Jesus would not, could not, suddenly turn into a boogey man.

And in that moment, I rejected what I later came to understand was a theology of fear. A theology, a view of God grounded in uncertainty, in the idea that we need to always be on our guard, making sure that we are constantly perfect—something none of us can achieve, awake and alert, so that we will be good enough for Jesus when he comes again.

Now it's easy to point fingers and say, well, that's another church, that's a different tradition. We don't do that here. I hate to break it to you, but the theology of fear has a long history and very deep roots, and, yes, that includes our Episcopal tradition as well. In doing my research for this sermon, I found lots of teachings focused on being alert, making sure we're awake and ready, always in good standing with God and with the church, so that we won't be left behind. It wasn't all that long ago when we were also

teaching that the unbaptized would not be joining the choir of saints, that those who died without last rites might not make it into that heavenly kingdom.

And fear does not only exist in our theology, we are also living today in what has become a era of fear. We are bombarded with negativity in our new cycles. We see horrible things happening around us—people snatched off the streets by masked individuals, individuals receiving assistance being cut off without notice, families facing a horrific choice between paying for food or health care. These things are real, they are happening, and it is easy, oh so easy, to fall into the trap of fear.

But there is a way forward, there is hope. And we see this in our reading from Romans. “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.”

That is our hope, that is our instruction—put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Live honorably. Be awake, aware of what is happening around us. Don’t ignore or run away from the bad. But also, don’t be sucked in by it. Don’t compromise your values. Continue to live as Jesus instructed—love each other, care for the poor, open our homes to the immigrant, the stranger, show mercy to those around us. Remain awake, yes, but not out of fear, remain awake in hope, in anticipation, in the knowledge that God is with us, in our present.

I’d like to close with a quote from Corrie ten Boom. Some of you may know her story, or have seen the movie of her life, “In My Father’s House.” For those who don’t, Corrie ten Boom lived with her father and sister in the Netherlands during World War II. They were part of a Christian community there and, when the German occupiers began rounding up Jews to take to the camps, the ten Boom family opened their home to their Jewish neighbors. They hid several individuals in their rambling old house until, one day, they were betrayed.

The occupiers didn’t just take the Jewish individuals hiding in the house. Corrie, her sister and her father were arrested as well, and were also sent to the camps. Both her sister and her father died there. Corrie herself survived. This is a woman who experienced evil firsthand, who could have given in to fear, but instead stepped forward, put on the armor of light, lived honorably, and though it all, held tight to her belief in a loving God.

When asked about her actions, her courage, her beliefs, when asked if she was afraid, Corrie ten Boom responded, “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”

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And that is what I'd like to leave you with today. A reminder that, while we don't know the day or the hour when Jesus will come again, while we don't know what will happen in our lives, in the world around us, while we don't know what tomorrow's headlines will be, while our future is unknown and unknowable, we do know our God. Our God who is faithful, our God who is loving, our God who is just. And, in knowing our God, we can face the future unafraid, we can stay awake, not out of fear, but in hope, in anticipation of the coming of Emmanuel, God with Us. Amen