

First Sunday of Advent Year C – Sister Monica Clare

Sermon on Matthew 24:36-44

The scripture passage that we just heard, from the Gospel of Matthew, is one of those many passages that can make us feel very uncomfortable.

Jesus speaks here about regular people, just living their lives and eating and drinking and getting married to each other as in the days of Noah, and suddenly the coming of the Son of Man changes everything.

When I was a kid in the Southern Baptist church, this passage was used to scare us into behaving ourselves. Two will be in the field; it says - 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.

There was even a sort of cheesy hippie guitar song that was sung to us on Wednesday nights in church about it, and it was called – ominously - “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.”

This and many other passages like it are used by some interpreters as a description of the Rapture, a theoretical future incident where the worthy will be sort of airlifted into heaven and the unworthy will be left behind for the time of tribulation.

You can all breathe a sigh of relief that there is actually no concrete scriptural basis for the concept of the Rapture. The passage here might indeed be referring to the end times in some metaphorical way, but it also may be referring to the times in which we live now, where we might be standing next to a loved one when they suddenly pass away, or we may be blissfully living our lives without knowing a natural disaster or some other cataclysm is about to occur.

This passage hits home even more for us in this time of pandemic, when all look back to January 2020 and remember how our lives seemed so safe, so sure, and so normal. We had no idea that something was about to change our lives forever. We can certainly look back over this long, painful experience, and say yes, I do wish we’d all been ready.

The era of COVID has caused so much loss and grief, and we never saw it coming. But the other scripture passages for today remind us that loss and grief is not all there is. This beautiful reading from Isaiah, the Psalm, and Paul's letter to the Romans speak of peace, and light, and prosperity, and salvation. They remind us, in their long and ancient tradition during our darkest days – that we are a people of hope.

Our collect for today, the First Sunday of Advent, is one of my favorites. It borrows from Paul's words to the Romans about laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light. Instead of dwelling in fear of the coming of the Son of Man, the collect tells us of a time of glorious majesty.

On that first Advent, that first coming of Christ into the world at the Nativity, the world had been dwelling in deep darkness. Things seemed hopeless, as they do when we are in the dark time of winter when the world seems to have died. As people of God, as people of Hope, though, we know that winter always becomes spring, and that everything is born again as it has been born since the beginning of creation.

We have lost so much in these long years of pandemic, but we have not lost our hope. We can still make ourselves ready for the coming of Christ, and the reign of peace where swords of destruction will be beaten into plowshares of creation and life. We can prepare ourselves each day for the unexpected coming of Christ into our daily concerns, into the depths of our troubled hearts, and into the darkness of our despair. We can remember that even when we face death, we know that our Savior has triumphed over death to lead us into a beautiful eternity.

The gospel passage that we heard today is part of a long speech that Jesus gave to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. Can you imagine being a disciple, hearing all this? Instead of a rousing speech from their leader, telling them everything was going to be great, and they'd all overthrow the Romans and rise triumphant, he told them about a journey of uncertainty and fear. But the difference was – he told them he'd be with them no matter what happened.

Our long and dark winter is not all there is. We know in our hearts that we will see the springtime again and that with every loss, and every occasion for grief, a space is created for new life. Every loss is followed by God's promise of eternity.

The catechism of our faith, in the Book of Common Prayer, contains a section called "The Christian Hope."

It says:

"The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world. By the coming of Christ in glory, we mean that Christ will come, not in weakness but in power, and will make all things new."

And so, as we begin our season of waiting for our Savior to come, let us remember Paul's words to the Romans: "Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." Amen.