1st Sunday of Advent
Sermon 11.27.22

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 plowshares, 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!

Matthew 24:36-44
"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. (365)

Happy new year, everyone. We're off again on the adventure that is the church year. It begins today, and it begins with this, one of the shortest seasons, just four weeks: Advent.

It's also one of the strangest seasons, certainly when it comes to time. Over its four weeks, it moves us backward in time. It begins with a look to the "Parousia," the so-called second coming of Christ at the end of time. It then moves us to the middle of time, two episodes from the life of Christ, both involving his cousin, John, John the baptizer. We finish the season with the fourth Sunday of Advent, the annunciation, when the birth of Jesus is announced to Joseph, and then the birth itself. Just so, Advent serves as a reminder that those who count themselves among the church live amidst time in a strange way—in an "already but not yet," it's often said.

It's as if we're to live with the end in mind. It's as if the end is to break in, into the middle, enlightening it, filling it with a purpose that inspires.

Already, but not yet, is the promised reign of God's grace and immediate presence. Already has come abiding peace—no need for swords, no compulsion to war; but not yet absolutely has come abiding peace. The promise of that arrival is itself the first fruits of that arrival, but it is not

the fullness of that arrival. The anticipation of its coming is the advent of its coming but is not the completion of its coming.

Just imagining it is the beginning of its being realized.

It's hard to do what you cannot see—while it's also hard not to do what you can see. The body follows the eyes, they say. So, keep watch.

Which is itself a challenge.

"Keep watch."

"For what?"

"Just keep watch."

It's furthermore a challenge because our watchfulness shouldn't have us in a state of such pique that we lose our heads. Really, our anticipation shouldn't land us in a state of reactivity or a giving over of ourselves to emotional forces beyond ourselves. In sum, we shouldn't freak out in our anticipation, come unmoored from the actual. We should not freak out when it does though seem that things are about to change, utterly.

Which is sort of what it feels like to live now, don't you think? As if things are about utterly to change?

This is the point of the parable Jesus tells in referring to the time of Noah.

We perhaps hear this in light of the *Left Behind* series of books that were popular about twenty years ago, and which I can only hope have faded in popularity for their being wildly inaccurate in their theological framing. In those books and resultant movies, as I understand it, having neither read nor seen any of them, being "left behind" is bad while being "taken up" is good. Being "left behind" is purportedly what happens to those whom God abandons to the world as it falls to destruction, while being "taken up" is what happens to those whom God has chosen to give an escape hatch, a safe way out.

But what Jesus is actually here remembered to have said is exactly the opposite. Being left is good, while being taken up is bad. To be left is to remain faithful in the steady state of watchful hope and life-sustaining work, while to be taken up is to be given over to wild fear or thrashing dread, to be captured by emotional forces that have you far removed from reasoned calm, wizened hope, far removed indeed from yourself and your steadfast God.

Maybe you know the song, from the disco era, the band Chic's song "Le Freak" whose refrain is "Freak out!" It's sort of funny on its own because it has so steady a disco beat that it's about as far from freaking out musically as can be. Funnier still, though, kids these days, or at least

mine, sing it otherwise: "Free cow," which, if you listen to it, it does sort of sound like they're saying.

"Free cow!" a much calmer refrain.

The world will cough up all sorts of reasons for us to freak out. When you're about to, remember this otherwise refrain: "Free cow."

Not the most profound preaching point ever made, but one you're likely to remember, am I right?

That said, the earliest hearers of this book, the Gospel According to Matthew, would have found themselves amidst a world even more uncertain, and therefore unnerving, than the one we find ourselves in. As with Luke's gospel, which we followed last year, as of last week, so with Matthew: it speaks to us from the time when the Temple had just been destroyed, the city Jerusalem had just been reduced to rubble, and everything was up for grabs as to what might come next, as to how new order would settle in and play out. The loss of the Temple, we should never fail to remember, wasn't just a cultural tragedy, not to mention an architectural feat (pulling enormous stones down one by one). It was an existential threat, at least as far as how it was felt.

What's more, Jesus is remembered in Matthew to have said this while he was himself in the Temple, in the last week of his life, just a few days before his arrest and his crucifixion. So, the likelihood of catastrophic change was very much in the air, as Jesus lived this and more certainly as Matthew, fifty years later, wrote this.

Catastrophic change, as it happens, presents reason both for fear but also for hope. (Freak out! But also free cow.) Because the new order might bring new blessing, might simply be better than what has come before.

Which brings us to yet another challenge of Advent. Advent would have us fully cognizant of all that's not right with the world. Advent, and its characteristic hope, would have us ever mindful that much of the world is downright wrong.

There is here much room for improvement.

I remember one Advent years ago being especially in this frame of mind. I told a colleague the season was like trying to sleep on pincushion—all these little pricks of "not right," "not right," pricking, sometimes piercing. I could barely stand it. Hope, it turns out, is no easy posture in the world. Unlike wishing, hoping requires more resilient stuff, more steadfast stuff.

The question is, on the cusp of change, especially radical change, how graciously can we move from what is to what should be and shall be? How much suffering will there be on the way to a better way?

Remember when Hilary Clinton was remembered to have said we were going to put a lot of coal miners out of work? She was speaking of the new initiatives in green energy and tech she aimed to support. She was making a larger point that we'd have to structure into the plan ways to make it so those who lost also gained, those who lost work also gained support and real ways into new opportunity. But that point was lost in the soundbite that went viral, and the point has been all but lost in the policies we're putting in place.

Ross Douthat has attempted the same acknowledgement in his advocating for making abortion illegal. He advocates for social changes that make an unplanned pregnancy less a burden that lands only on the one who is pregnant. He advocates for more resources available, and a broader social responsibility, and he defends the anti-abortion movement as gracious in that regard—though, if you ask, me the social mercies offered to women who'd otherwise seek abortion are woefully inadequate to the task. The so-called safe-haven drop-off boxes that Amy Coney Barret has advocated are grotesque more than merciful, if you ask me.

Setting that aside, in neither case have these way-making measures been realized.

Turns out we're not so good at major change. Our resistance to it, or are freaking it out at it, both catch us flat-footed when the new arrives like a thief in the night.

Maybe this year will be different. Maybe this year, Advent can put us in mind not just of the (by now) very predictable arrival of Christmas but also of the much less predictable arrival of whatever comes next, that we might live into it in hope, that we might witness amidst it God's grace and sustaining presence.

Today, this first Sunday of Advent, is always the Sunday of hope. A most challenging posture in the world, hope would have us aware of the "not yet" of it all, while also assured that what is not yet shall surely be. One day. One day.

So keep watch for it—and maybe even find a way to serve as midwife for it, midwife for its laboring forth.

God is coming. God is here. God is coming.

Thanks be to God.