

Sacred Time

Matthew 24:42, Romans 13:11-14

November 27, 2022 First Sunday of Advent *Reflecting the Sacred series*

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“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

Matthew 24: 42

Make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! ...We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and over indulgence,..., in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!

Romans 13: 11-14 (The Message)

The pumpkin pie plates are all empty, there may still be leftovers in the fridge, and we are remembering our Thanksgiving naps when Jesus says – Stay awake! Be ready! Our seasonal and church calendars collide. I hope you had a good Thanksgiving. On the cusp of winter, we pause and give thanks for all blessings small and large. The past year had its challenges, but we have gotten through it. So we gathered at abundant tables, and celebrated all the goodness we have tasted. The main course for the meal is gratitude: gratitude for a generous God, the Spirit that is in us and around us. I wish we could savor Thanksgiving a little longer.

However, now you see our sanctuary and chapel have been transformed for Advent, a season of waiting. It is a very busy season for many. The busy-ness of the holiday season can overrun the sense of the sacred. The irony is that setting apart time for connection with the sacred gets pushed aside in order to do other things in what is supposed to be the season of celebrating the incarnation of the Holy!

We will begin our Advent journey toward Christmas by emphasizing the gift of being awake to the “now”... the gift of sacred time with God, with each other, and with all in need of hope.

Advent as a liturgical season has focuses on the theme “waiting.” In some ways we pause and go back to before the Christmas story of Jesus’ birth. It is a season that exemplifies the “already and not yet” concept. We often think of this “in between” place we inhabit.

The Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent may be a bit of a surprise. Matthew has an end-time, apocalyptic orientation. Matthew seemed to convey his belief that history is divided into two ages — a present, evil age that God would soon replace with a new age often called the realm of God or the realm of heaven. The old age is marked by the presence of Evil One and the demons, and by idolatry, sin, injustice, exploitation, sickness, enmity between nature

and humankind, violence, and death. The new age will be characterized by the complete rule of God and the angels, and by authentic worship, forgiveness, mutual support, justice, peace, health, blessing between nature and humankind, and eternal life.

For Matthew, God is acting through Jesus Christ to effect the change. The birth, life, teaching, and resurrection are the first phase of the transformation, with the complete manifestation arriving with the another arrival. Meanwhile, Matthew's community lives in a conflict zone between the ages. God calls the Matthean community to follow the instruction and model of the Matthean Jesus.

Some scholars affirm that many in Matthew's congregation were losing confidence in the coming of the Realm. The time of the new age was delayed. Their witness was fading. Matthew wrote to encourage them to continue. No one knew how or when this new age will be ushered in. The point Matthew is making is - Be ready.

Verses in Matthew 24 reinforce the idea that the community must "be ready." In this context, to "be ready" is to continue to do what Jesus taught in the Gospel of Matthew. The community is to prepare for the final advent by living and witnessing as Jesus instructed. The liturgical season of Advent is an annual reminder of the importance of faithfully doing what Jesus said.

Some people have taken these passages about time and fulfillment of time and described something called "the rapture" which was associated with the "Left Behind" book series in the 1970's. "The rapture" was supposedly when believers are airlifted out of the world while the rest of humankind suffers.

However, neither Matthew in particular nor biblical eschatologies contain the detailed time-line scenarios of this theology. To the contrary, Matthew encourages the congregation to remain faithful in witness even in the midst of conflict.

We can see this apocalyptic language as metaphor tied to a first-century world view that is no longer ours. We do not live under the Roman Empire although there is much empire thinking about life and faith. We do not anticipate a singular event that will instantly transform the world. Instead, God is constantly present, luring the world and each one of us toward realm of God qualities. We can participate with Spirit in bringing about the Beloved Community life. Stay awake.... Be ready..... We can live into a vision of a fullness of time when all is made right.

So Sacred Time is a way of talking about living day to day with a vision of fullness of time and wholeness in each person and all creation. In Richard Rohr's book the *Universal Christ*, he invites us to imagine that the *Universal Christ, the Cosmic Christ* is the fullness of everything, always and already present. It was out of this "Christ-soaked" world that Jesus was born. He is the physical manifestation of what was already here (and continued to be) from the beginning.

So what are we waiting for and what we stay awake for?... Perhaps what we really wait for is *ourselves*—to fully know the presence of the sacred reflected in and through all around and in us. So in a sense, we can say that we “wait,” but the waiting is an active revealing if we will only say “yes” to the invitation to waking up to the idea that we are all in Christ. moving from what we thought we always knew to what we now fully recognize.

This waiting on ourselves to “see” is enabled by contemplative practices. This practice of attentiveness is a way to begin to fill in the gaps. Yet, part of this practice is to soften our focus, to let things be mysterious for a time, to simply wonder without the need to have all the answers, to let things simply soak in.

This is one of the reasons we have periods of silence in worship. This is “time reimagined” for most of us. We more easily translate being “awake” as *doing something*. What if “attentiveness” and “keeping awake” was less about hyper-vigilance and more about allowing a non-anxious stance for this season where awe and wonder take the lead? A time in which our attentiveness is geared to recognizing the reflected light of Christ?

Seeing the reflections of the sacred requires that we pay more attention to the “right now” rather than the past or the future. Our minds are so easily occupied by memory and imagination... wonderful gifts that we possess. But living in those places often rob us of another great gift—the ability to “notice the now” in a deeper way. And so, as Rohr reminds us, we are never *actually* separated from the presence of God—from the sacred—except in our mind’s incessant activity.

Joan Chittister describes this sacred time of Advent. “The year opens with Advent, the season that teaches us to wait for what is beyond the obvious. It trains us to see what is behind the apparent. Advent makes us look for God in all those places we have, until now, ignored.”

“Sacred Time” in this first week of Advent is rooted in our scripture passages about being ready and awake and noticing the light, and reflecting that light into the world. How will soak in this time of waiting? A season preparation, pregnant with possibility?

In this time what if we....

Pause throughout the day and marvel at something.

Take a deep breath.

Light a candle.

Drive or walk around and enjoy the light displays.

Notice other kinds of light.

Listen to your favorite music.

Speak of the deepest things we know with a friend.

Notice when you are touched by moments of kindness.

In this season of Advent, may it be a time of being awake, of noticing, of being and doing.

The image from our source material includes this blurred photo. What if we chose to blur the hard edges of our lives. To see the whole picture with our hearts. To train our hearts to love as God loves... with an all-encompassing compassion. To look at life through the reflections of the sacred. May we remember the call to shine with this holy light. Amen.

Source Material

“Reflecting the Sacred” by Rev. Marcia McFee, Worship Design Studio