

“Watch and Get ready”

Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44

Good morning. I hope you all had a good Thanksgiving.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. We lit the first candle on our Advent wreath. Advent is the period that has four Sundays before Christmas. It is the time of waiting and time to prepare ourselves to welcome Christ to be born in us, to welcome him again as our Savior and King.

Away from the religious meaning of Christmas, we are entering a busy season. The world around us tells us how many days are left before Christmas. We shop and buy presents. We send Christmas cards, decorate our houses, bake cookies and try to share our love with those who are less fortunate than we in many ways with our gifts and visitations. The lines at the register in stores are getting longer. People drive cars faster. Making plans for Christmas Eve and day --whom to invite and whose house to go to and when --requires much coordination and may even take some hot argument at home. Our tension rises up when Christmas gets closer -- when we are supposed to be more joyful and peaceful. It's reality, isn't it?

So, come to church during Advent and have your respite. For about an hour on Sunday, you don't need to be standing and cooking, fixing something from your “honey do list,” cleaning the house or writing cards. You listen to good choir music, praise God together with our fellow Christians, listen to the Word written and spoken and pray as the family of God. During the week, in this season of Advent, there are two

Meditation Circles, two Men's Bible Study along with Women's Bible Study at Anna McClure's every week, and a prayer meeting.

The Scripture lessons on the first Sunday of Advent every year are about the second coming of Christ; "Christ will come again: watch and be ready." Getting ready for the second coming is different from getting ready for Christmas, the first coming of Christ.

First, regarding Christmas, we know the date. December 25. As for the second coming of Christ, we do not know the date. "Nobody knows when that day or hour will come," says Jesus, "not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows."

Just like people before had not known the date when Jesus, the Messiah, would be born, we do not know when he would be back again on earth. "Therefore, stay alert!" says Jesus, "You don't know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn't allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don't know."

I come from a country where there are many earthquakes. After the 2011 magnitude 9 earthquake hit northeastern Japan and caused tsunami, which led to a disaster at the nuclear plant, people in Japan are trying to get ready for the sudden attack of earthquake. My brother stabled china cabinets and drawers to the wall with 90 degree metal posts. At the bottom of my mother's bed used to be a pair of sneakers, a helmet and a big backpack, not that she could carry it in case of

emergency. In the back pack were a flashlight, a change of clothes, her identification card and some dry crackers for food. One of the things I used to do when I visited her once a year was to purchase about 10 2-liter water bottles to replace the old ones in case of an emergency.

Let's check our readiness for Hurricanes. Is a first-aid kit available quickly? Are emergency phone numbers on hand? Are our homes insured for flood damage? Are flashlights available at hand with extra batteries? If we need to evacuate from our area, do we have a place to go to? Is the spare tire inflated and are all the pieces for the Jack in place? Is a first-aid kit in the car, as well as a flashlight, etc?

Getting ready for emergencies for outside matters is one thing. How about getting ready internally?

Going back to getting ready for Christmas, the first coming, we know well what will happen on December 25 this year. It's most likely that we will be together with our families, open our presents early in the morning, come to church to worship since this year Christmas day falls on Sunday, and a feast will be on the table.

We don't know well, however, how Christ will come back again and what will actually happen on that day. Jesus spoke. "At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left.

Therefore, stay alert! " Later on he says, "Therefore you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don't know."

What must happen in our lives for us to believe that, yes, we are prepared, that we are ready for Jesus to come? Let's think about that for a moment. You may have your own responses as to how we might get ready for the second coming of Jesus. How can we be ready for his second coming?

One thing which keeps coming back to me and we know it worked the first time is the prayer of the repentant sinner on the cross. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Immediately Jesus promised this man, "Today you will be with me in paradise." This man was taken and the other left.

"Jesus, remember me, when you come in to your kingdom." This is a prayer of confession and repentance, humbling ourselves before Christ. Jesus, I have messed up my life; Jesus remember me, when you come in to your kingdom. Jesus, I said the things I shouldn't have said, have done what I didn't really mean to do, to my loved ones and hurt them; Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, I failed to share more of what I have with those who are in need; Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, I haven't loved enough those who you have sent me; Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

To make this prayer as our life prayer will certainly be a way to prepare ourselves for the second coming of Christ.

Another Bible passage tells us how we may get ready for Christ's coming. It's a parable of the last judgment from Matthew 25. Many of you know about it.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. To the people on his right, he would say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me." And when they reply, "Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will say, "I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!"

Then the King will say to those on the left, I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me." When they reply, "Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?" He will say, "I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me."

Submit

Jesus teaches us that serving one of the least in our society is serving Him, who will come and reign in the end time.

There is a story I think that goes with this parable. Some of you may have heard it before.

There was once an old stone monastery tucked away in the middle of a picturesque forest. For many years people would make the significant detour required to seek out this monastery. The peaceful spirit of the place was healing for the soul.

In recent years however fewer and fewer people were making their way to the monastery. The monks had grown jealous and petty in their relationships with one another, and the animosity was felt by those who visited.

The Abbot of the monastery was distressed by what was happening, and poured out his heart to his good friend Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a wise old Jewish rabbi. Having heard the Abbot's tale of woe, he asked if he could offer a suggestion. "Please do" responded the Abbot. "Anything you can offer."

Jeremiah said that he had received a vision, an important vision, and the vision was this: the messiah was among the ranks of the monks. The Abbot was flabbergasted. One among his own was the Messiah! Who could it be? He knew it wasn't himself, but who? He raced back to the monastery and shared his exciting news with his fellow monks.

The monks grew silent as they looked into each other's faces. Was this one the Messiah?

From that day on the mood in the monastery changed. Joseph and Ivan started talking again, neither wanting to be guilty of slighting the Messiah. Pierre and Naibu left behind their frosty anger and sought out each other's forgiveness. The monks began serving each other, looking out for opportunities to assist, seeking healing and forgiveness where offence had been given.

One traveler, then another, found their way to the monastery. Word soon spread about the remarkable spirit of the place. People once again took the journey to the monastery and found themselves renewed and transformed. All because those monks knew the Messiah was among them.

I believe that the message of this story is this: The Messiah, the Christ, was in each monk. They just needed to recognize Christ in others.

In this season of Advent, we prepare gifts to those who are less fortunate than most of us through our Adopt a Family outreach program. Carolers will visit those who cannot come to church due to their failing health with the gifts made by our Sunday School children. We may do our best, in our own ways, to help people celebrate Christmas.

This year, let us do our best to see Christ in those children we purchase gifts for. We may say a prayer, "Lord, help us recognize you in those people we visit with carols, gifts and communion in this season." If we do our best to see Christ in others with such a prayer, I'm sure the way we spend our money would change; the way we meet and treat people would change as it was so with the monks in the story.

Recognizing Christ in others, in other words, finding their worthiness, beauty and the image of God in others, makes us stop in this busy season, because we need to pause and re-orient our way of seeing others. If we try to see Jesus even in the person who cuts us in line at stores, although we may let the person know that he/she cut the line, If we try to find Christ, an image of God, in the persons who hold different political or social views from ours, if we can see Christ in those who have different faiths from ours, maybe we are not only preparing ourselves for the second coming of Jesus but for Christmas, the time to welcome infant Jesus, born in a stable, in our hearts and lives again.

A couple of Sundays ago, Pastor Jeannie told us that being thankful, having gratitude, is a spiritual practice. Finding Jesus, their worthiness, beauty and the image of God, in other people is a spiritual practice too. It doesn't come easily. That's why we practice -- practice so that it may come more easily to us in the end. And when we practice, who knows that we are getting a little bit closer to the vision of peace in the Isaiah passage that was read this morning. "Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools."(2:4)

May we all have a blessed Advent – with our prayer, “Jesus, remember me, when we come into your Kingdom,” and with our practice of seeing Jesus in the persons we encounter.

Amen.