

11/27/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

God, we thank you for the gift of this new day – a day, like every other, that holds promise and potential beyond our imagining if we can open ourselves to the gifts and the movement of your Holy Spirit.

On this first day of Advent we begin the expectant waiting – the hopeful angst as we anticipate, again, the arrival of Jesus into this world as one of us, a human being. But one who was so finely attuned to your love and intentions for creation that he turned all of humanity on its head, upside-down. And we confess, God that two thousand years later we still struggle to understand and to live fully into the promise and potential that his Spirit brings every day. Forgive our lack of attention and anticipation. We pray for eyes that can see and ears that can hear your good news. We pray for hearts that long for your restoration, God. We pray for restoration of bodies that suffer from viruses, cancer, broken and repaired bones. We think especially of those who are sick and recovering from Covid, from influenza or RSV. We pray for Connie and Karen as they continue to heal from recent knee replacement. We pray for restoration of minds that suffer from depression or anxiety, or other ills that we can't see but that are very present. We pray for restoration of relationships that are broken, whether because of pride or wounded-ness, apathy or fear. We pray for restoration of hearts that are broken from grief or loss. We pray for restoration between nations as those with power try to broker agreements and those without power both suffer and do what you've empowered them to do with grass roots movements and speaking their truth. We think of those who are imprisoned unjustly or otherwise mistreated because of their work. We pray for restoration of the earth – that we and all people, would humble ourselves to care for the planet.

And we pray for your blessings, God. Bless babies that are forming in the womb. Bless their parents and all who will love them. We think especially of Jill and Braden. Bless those who are making new covenants of marriage with one another. We pray for Lucas Hiebert and Michelle Schrag this coming Saturday as well as Erin Brubaker and Dylan Slabaugh yesterday. Be with them and their families on these new adventures. Bless Tabor Mennonite Church this morning as they welcome Pastor Todd Schlosser into their midst. May he bring new energy and encouragement to this congregation and to our community.

Bless this time of worship, God. Make ready our minds and our hearts to your promises of restoration and hope. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Faithful God,

In this season of waiting and watching for signs of the holy one, we present our offerings, as well as worship, our time, and our attention.

We present them in hope, trusting you to fulfill your promise.

Let us be faithful in vigilance, and readiness, so that we may welcome Christ into hearts.

ARE YOU READY? – PASTOR CALEB

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

You might be thinking, what does that have to do with Advent or Christmas? Especially the part about staying awake so that your home isn't burglarized – unless it's the Grinch that you're worried about.

First of all, I didn't choose this passage; Passages about the end of the world usually aren't what I gravitate toward. The two passages Lynel read are part of a lectionary of readings used by many Christian churches globally.

Advent simply means "coming." It is a season where we celebrate the coming of Christ as a little baby – God taking human flesh and fully entering the fabric of the human experience in order to redeem it and restore us.

Advent is a season of waiting and longing – parallel in some ways to Lent. Because Christmas is on a Sunday this year, we have the longest possible Advent – four full weeks. While all of the black Friday retailers celebrate as if Christmas is already here, the Christ child has not yet come; we are still waiting.

If Advent simply means "coming" then it equally refers to Christ coming again, which is what this passage from Matthew is about.

You see, Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem. The disciples marveled at the buildings and particularly the temple. Jesus told them that all this will be destroyed. This leads the disciples to ask more questions about the future. When will this be? When will the end of the age come?

Maybe some of you have heard of Claas Epp. Claas Epp was a leader in a Mennonite colony in Russia. In the 1870s, Epp began telling people that the return of Christ was imminent. He led a group of Mennonites further east, convinced that they would meet Jesus there and inaugurate Christ's Millennium rule.

His group eventually settled in what is now Uzbekistan. Epp became more and more fanatic, as he was guided by dreams and visions. He expected to ascend into the sky to meet Elijah in the air. The dates he set for the coming of Christ came and went. Epp went as far as claiming to be the son of Christ and fourth person of the Trinity. Thoroughly discredited by this time, those left in his congregation excommunicated him.¹

This is the kind of story that justifiably makes one nervous about predictions of the end of the age.

¹Bartsch, Franz and Richard D. Thiessen. (April 2005). Epp, Claas (1838-1913). *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Retrieved 28 November 2022, from [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp, Claas \(1838-1913\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp,_Claas_(1838-1913))

In Matthew 24, Jesus tells his disciples the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed. This in fact happened, when the Romans attacked and destroyed the city after a misguided Jewish rebellion.

To us this is an event of the remote past. But for Jesus' contemporaries, there could be no more earth-shattering event than the destruction of the temple. It surely felt like the beginning of the end of the age. It is hard to know when the Gospel writer is really talking about events that to us are remote past, and when the Gospel writer is talking about the full arrival of God's kingdom.

What is clear is that Jesus told his disciples to be ready and to watch for signs of his coming. He said, *"about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."*

No one, not even Jesus himself, knows the timing or form of how it will take place. Jesus gave three examples of scenarios in which people are going about daily life and they are caught unprepared when a crisis hits.

People in the days of Noah went about daily life, eating and drinking, and getting married. They were unprepared when the flood arrived. Then you have two men in a field and two women milling grain. It possibly describes the intensity of an enemy invasion in which people flee. One person makes it, and the other does not.

The final image is of a sound sleeper who does not suspect a burglar to break in during the night and sleeps peacefully while his possessions are carried away.

Several years ago, we were returning from a visit to South Dakota, where Beth's parents live. It was winter weather. A strong north wind practically blew us back to Kansas, but I drove for hours on very high alert for patches of snow and ice.

On the one hand, we just wanted to get home. But we didn't want to end up in any ditch in the process. So I had to drive more slowly and with greater focus on what was on the road ahead.

Jesus' lesson is not to go about life as if you expect things to remain the same. Go about life with a readiness and watchfulness as if a crisis, a pivot, the entry point into another world could appear at any moment.

Our first scripture passage this morning was from Isaiah [2:1-5]. It includes these words:

"In the last days

*the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;"*

And then it goes on to give these memorable words:

*[God] will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares*

*and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.*

This passage was very important to the early Christians. It was how they understood their way of life and the new age that they were entering. The prophet Isaiah had this vision for the “last days.”

While war rages in the Ukraine, we cannot say that we have entered the new age. It is rather, a vision to hold in our imagination of a future age, another world.

“The end of the age” Jesus spoke of is the difficult transition between the world as we know it, and this future age. The first generation of Jesus followers probably really thought the world as they knew it was about to end soon. Once the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, it must have really felt like the end times to them.

But from our vantage point 2000 years later, it can be hard to know what to take from these apocalyptic passages.

Some people might discredit Christianity as a faith that mistakenly anticipated something that never came to pass – much like the delusions of Claas Epp. Obviously, the Kingdom of God did not arrive in the first century, so maybe we don’t need to pay much attention to the New Testament.

Many Christians tend to ignore the apocalyptic texts in the New Testament. We are more interested in having predictable, settled lives right now. Ever since Christianity became the religion of the Roman empire, we could argue that it became a religion that is about maintaining the social order of the world so that Christians can feel at home in it.

The idea of the “kingdom of God” was simply transposed into the realm of heaven after this life is over. But meanwhile, Christians have aimed to increase our power, wealth, and control in this world.

Still other Christian groups from time to time have been obsessively focused on the end-times, even attempting like Claas Epp to predict when, how, and where Christ will return. The urgency of the New Testament becomes our own urgency.

But this still begs the question – everyone so far who thought they were living in the last days has been proven wrong. What’s different that we think now it will be us?

I can’t answer all the questions we might have about passages like the ones we are hearing today. But I humbly suggest that there is another option besides the three I named.

The genius of Jesus was that he called on his followers to live in this in-between space straddled between the present fallen world and the kingdom of God.

This means we seek to be faithful to the way of Jesus in this in-between space of anticipating another world, and living out that anticipation in the present one.

We don't wait for God's kingdom passively. We don't simply accommodate to the world. We also don't attempt to understand the mind of God, when Jesus said not even the Son knows the day or the hour.

We are to live in a way that we are always "ready." If we suddenly found ourselves in the new age tomorrow, we hope this is what we had been preparing ourselves for all along.

Jesus' message was not such good news to the comfortable. It was good news for those without much of a place in the present world. It was never how to do well in the present world, but rather how to live in an alert expectation for the kingdom of God.

All this might not seem much like an Advent message. This Advent, we desire to celebrate Christ's coming into the world as a little baby, and relive the spirit of joy and our traditions from Christmases past. But I challenge you to not make Advent or Christmas simply a celebration of stories and traditions from the past.

My challenge is to watch for how the Spirit of Jesus is showing up now. Intruding into our daily lives in the present. This is an attitude of hopeful angst. We need hope, but we also must feel the angst.

APPLICATION

If we are to take Jesus and the Gospels seriously, we cannot simply dismiss this "end-times" stuff. We can remain mostly agnostic about the future. But Jesus called followers to live continually as if we are at the end of the age, at the cusp of something new.

We are not in "ordinary time," but in a threshold or liminal time. We live in the space that straddles between two worlds: the present broken world, and a world in which swords are beaten into plowshares.

We live according to this new world we are longing for with a hopeful angst, with an imagination grounded in the scriptures. Because we are confident in God's faithfulness, we live according to the law of love of this new world, while still located in our present messy world.

The call is not to crack some code, or live in fear of a crisis. The call is to live in a way that is truly "paying attention." Rather than being swept up in the pursuits, to-dos, or pressures of daily life, we must take the sacred dimension of reality so seriously, that we pay attention to what is in front of us.

Many spiritual traditions emphasize "alertness" as an important virtue. It is not easy to do. We live on a certain kind of auto-pilot, with the content of our lives shaped by the culture, or by the expectations of others, or by our false pursuits of self-worth, or sometimes just survival.

But we don't stop to pay attention. To watch. To be ready for God's action.

How do we do this? Maybe by stopping, by resting. By marveling at God's creation, and comprehending our smallness. By giving thanks for the breaths God gives us, for the blood God pumps through our veins. Maybe by catching the joy and innocence of a small child. By really

seeing the people God places in front of us. By asking, “what does this moment really ask for me?”

The only thing of lasting importance is a life based on the love, forgiveness, and peace that Jesus exemplified and that God upheld by raising Jesus from the dead.

So, we pay attention to the people that are in front of us. We pay attention to the broken people who are near. We watch for mini-comings of Christ with sustained urgency.

I challenge each of us to approach this Advent with a heightened attention of what is in front of us. May we be ready to welcome the peace Isaiah proclaimed. May we be ready to welcome Christ to come again.

BENEDICTION

May you leave from this place in hopeful angst, waiting and watching for the coming of Christ and living today with readiness for the new age.