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## “Habitually Ready”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

First Sunday of Advent (Year A)

November 27, 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44

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We begin the new liturgical year, Advent I, always, with readings about the second coming of Christ; this year it is from Matthew’s Gospel. And there seem to be two polarities of reaction and response concerning this end-time phenomena with many of us locating ourselves somewhere along the continuum between these two poles.

One pole is expressed in the classic poem by Irish poet William Butler Yeats, entitled “Second Coming” written nearly 100 years ago in 1919 in the aftermath of the traumatic upheaval of World War I. It reads:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

This poem's imagery is dark, troubling and perplexing:

*things falling apart, the centre not holding, anarchy, blood-dimmed tide,  
the reeling shadows of indignant desert birds,  
and this sphinx-like creature rising from its sleep to slouch towards Bethlehem.*

Its imagery is disturbing, but certainly no more disturbing  
than some of Jesus' own words in Matthew

concerning the coming of the Son of Man:

*wars and rumors of wars, pseudo-Christ and false prophets,  
famines, earthquakes, persecution, people abandoning their faith  
and betraying one another, great distress to individuals, vultures gathering,  
the darkening of the sun and moon, and the falling of stars from the sky.*

Merriam Webster's word of the day last Monday was "Kafkaesque,"

which is defined as "having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality,"  
an appropriate adjective, I think, for these apocalyptic images.

I have to confide in you that in the aftermath of our recent elections,

this Kafkaesque language of cataclysmic upheaval reflects  
some of what I have been hearing from you, my people.  
Honestly, I never thought I would be doing post-election pastoral care,  
but that is exactly what I have been doing since November 8,  
hearing some of you articulate a deep sense of dismay  
over the ugly nature of the elections and uncertainty concerning the future.  
Some of us have made appointments with our counselors to discuss this  
gut-level anxiety that won't abate, some of us have upped our dosage  
of anti-depressants to keep from taking to our beds,  
and some of us are searching the scriptures frantically after Brexit,  
after Matthew, after the Cubs, after the election,  
to see what these things might mean collectively.

Yeats speaks to this deep dis-ease with his unsettling depiction  
of changes in the old world order,  
*of the best lacking all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.*  
And that is one way of reading and sensing the end-time phenomena that  
Jesus describes, which the post-Easter Church calls the Second Coming,  
the Parousia, the Apocalypse or the Eschaton.

Another pole of expression, totally different and at the opposite extreme,  
struck me as I traveled to Charlotte last week  
to visit our two grandchildren there.

My daughter called me in the car as I was grinding my teeth  
and winding my way through the road construction on I-85.

"What time do you think you'll get here?" she asked.

"Spencer wants to know because he is standing on the bench by the window  
with the blinds draped over his back, looking for your car.

And he says he won't come away from the window until you get here."

I was so touched by this expression of his longing to see me again.

That's another way of looking at the Second Coming: that hopeful anticipation

of those who wait and watch joyfully for signs that Jesus, the Messiah,  
is on his way to redeem our broken world and to usher in a time of peace.

If you listen to Christian praise music, this is much of what you hear.

A song by Michael W. Smith and Darlene Zschech,  
called *The Great Day (Second Coming)* says:

*He will come to claim us with a rushing wind  
Blown like fields of wheat, the world will bow and bend  
Held between our joy and disbelief  
Every trembling heart will finally face the same way  
On the great day.*

*One day Love will wear the crown;  
One day Love will set us free  
Hands up high and faces down;  
Angels teaching us to sing  
He will be King,  
He will be King.*

It is upbeat; it is hopeful; it is an expression of pure joy:

a very different feeling about the events of the Second Coming.

Christians are all over the place about how we feel about this phenomenon,  
our approach/avoidance or avoidance/approach relationship to it,  
falling somewhere along this spectrum between  
anxious dread and hopeful anticipation.

And there is biblical precedent for this. Jesus' disciples, too, were puzzled,  
didn't quite know what to make of this dark cloud of gloom that suddenly  
overshadows Jesus' countenance.

They, as first-century Jewish listeners, would have heard his earth-shaking predictions  
as typical of a Jewish prophet, along the line of what

Hebrew scripture has long referred to as the Day of the Lord:  
a sudden and surprising display of God's omnipotent power and judgment,  
a great cosmic shakedown and winnowing  
marked by the appearance of the Messiah,  
who will come at last to separate the wicked from the righteous  
*and finally usher in an era of justice and peace.*

When will this happen, the disciples want to know, and what will be the signs?  
Don't know, Jesus says, rather cavalierly.

No one knows the day of the hour, except God.

No one knows the day when the Lord, the Son of Man will come,  
he says in third-person objective, hardly implicating himself as fully divine,  
but rather situating himself among us, the fully human,  
who must prepare ourselves to accept both the anxiety and the anticipation  
of God's ultimate surprise.

It will be both a great and terrible day, depending upon one's state of readiness  
at that time, Jesus indicates.

Noah and his family were ready for the flood, but no one else  
seemed to take that storm cloud seriously!

And thus it was for Noah's family and his contemporaries both a great and terrible day,  
depending upon which side of the boat they found themselves on.

I think the disciples were asking Jesus the wrong question actually,  
and I think he knew that.

I think they were over-focused on the *when*, the day and time of his return,  
when they actually should have been more focused on  
the *how* of their preparation.

How should they get ready? How should they stay awake?

How should they keep watch? How *does* one prepare

for the great cosmic shakedown and winnowing of God?

I think Jesus' deflection of their *when* question actually steers them away from

the clocking and calendaring and aims them and us more in the direction of self examination in the advent of his redemptive return.

As twenty-first century disciples hearing Jesus again,

I want to suggest that watchfulness, wakefulness, and readiness for the coming of the Lord are **matters of habit:** of the ongoing discipline and practice, of loving the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, of loving our neighbors as ourselves, regularly and often, just as we have been taught to do, rather than as some last minute Hail Mary pass at discipleship at the eleventh hour.

The key word in Jesus' great commandment is "love," and **love is a habit.**

A book by James Smith that I read while on sabbatical, *You Are What You Love*, suggests that our heart/soul/mind/love of the Lord is a habit that "acquires direction and orientation because we are immersed over time in practices and rituals—in what we've called 'liturgies'—that affectively and viscerally train our desires."

(Smith, James. *You Are What You Love*, p. 32)

Smith says, "Anyone who can remember learning to play the piano, learning to type, or learning to drive, remembers choosing to engage in repeated practice over and over so that the rhythms could become habits" (Smith, p. 36).

The beautiful concert last Sunday organized to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this sanctuary and its Austin organ was not just a jam session concocted at the last moment by Kathy Parkins, Joe and Mary Kay Robinson, Lesley Curtis and Ben Maxwell, although they probably wish it had been that easy to assemble.

It was the culmination of many, many hours, days, and years of careful practice and conditioning. What we saw was only the beautiful tip of that iceberg! So it is with our ability to love.

Worship, prayer, silence and holy listening, study of Scripture, Holy Communion,

gratitude, and stewardship are habits that shape our ability to love the Lord. Henri Nouwen, who was infinitely wise in the ways of nurturing love, once said, "We must continually remind ourselves that the first commandment requiring us to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind is indeed the first.

I wonder if we really believe this. It seems that in fact we live as if we should give as much of our heart, soul, and mind as possible to our fellow human beings, while trying hard not to forget God...

But Jesus' claim is much more radical. He asks for a single-minded commitment to God and God alone. God wants all of our heart, all of our mind, and all of our soul."

*(Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Henri J. M. Nouwen, p. 24)*

Our spiritual practices, rituals, and liturgies are meant to keep us focused upon the Lord, first and foremost, and therefore to keep us ready at all times to meet the object of our adoration and love.

And likewise, we should continue to practice loving our neighbor as ourselves. South Africa's *Belhar Confession*, forged in the aftermath of crushing apartheid, includes the classic biblical prescriptions of neighbor love:  
to practice loving the destitute, the poor, and the wronged;  
to give bread to the hungry;  
to practice bringing justice and support to the oppressed,  
the immigrant, the refugee, the disenfranchised, the downtrodden,  
the black lives that should matter, those fearful of deportation,  
the tender gender benders, the underserved and the overlooked;  
to practice bringing good news to prisoners, and see to their restoration,  
just as we would see to the restoration of sight to the blind;  
and to reach out to widows and widowers, to those without families,  
and to those longing to find a beloved community which they might call home.

When we talked about our practices of faith at staff meeting the other day,  
it was suggested that maybe one reason so many of us are feeling  
dismayed, anxious, and unsettled following the election  
is because we had replaced many of our regular and ritual spiritual practices  
with hours of watching Fox News and MSNBC, Megyn Kelly  
and Rachel Maddow, following Twitter feeds and Facebook posts.  
Maybe what we are actually feeling now is a loss of spiritual mooring  
as we have remained too long adrift in the restless waves of politics.  
Maybe Advent comes at just the right time, every year, to refocus our attention  
and to retrain the habits of our hearts, souls, and minds.  
Maybe as Mindy suggested two Sundays ago, it is time for the church to double down  
on our acts of love in order to combat the racism, homophobia, demonization,  
and polarization that many of us are feeling  
directed at our more vulnerable neighbors.  
Maybe the Lord's Day of Peace *is* at hand,  
maybe salvation is nearer to the world now than when we became believers.  
And maybe, just maybe, we soon will be swapping swords for plowshares,  
darkness for light, anxiety for anticipation, and dismay for God's persistent hope.  
Friends, let's make love our habit while watching hopefully, remaining vigilant,  
and waiting and working compassionately for that great day  
when Jesus will come again to usher in peace on earth, good will to all. Amen.