

Sermon
First Sunday of Advent
November 26th, 2022
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: ISAIAH 2:1-5; PSALM 122; ROMANS 13:11-14; MATTHEW 24:36-44

What time is it? How much time do I have? How often do we ask ourselves these questions? The marking of time – clock time. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years. Our lives move from past through present to future to the ticking of the clock...

As you might know, the ancient Greeks had two words for time – chronos and kairos. Chronos refers to that tick tock clock time, but kairos measures moments not minutes. Kairos measures right moments. Opportune moments.

Today we begin a new church year with Advent. We mark four Sundays – weeks and days and hours that anticipate our celebration of God’s Incarnation: Jesus’ birth.

Jesus’ birth was the moment that God moved into our time. That movement into our time was a kairos moment! It was a moment that changed everything: past, present and future.

Our readings this morning have time woven through them:

Our passage from Isaiah invites us out of chronos time. In it, God’s coming is something broader than the individual. It’s international, cosmic in scope.

In the Letter to the Roman’s: what time is it? Is it the moment for you to wake up from sleep.

The Gospel passage we’ve just heard, from Matthew’s Gospel, is often read as a description of “end times”. Read with chronos time in mind it’s full of anticipation – when will these things come to pass? The passage ends with the words “Keep awake”. Keeping awake to the tick tock of the clock for minutes, hours, days, years – 2000 years! – is daunting. It’s tiring.

We are meant to remember the past. We are meant to look – dreaming, hoping – to the future. That past and future are gifts of our faith. But there is a present “keeping awake” that God invites us into.

Everything changed with that kairos moment when God entered our time and lived it with us. Jesus' birth – and his death and resurrection – changed absolutely everything: nothing will ever be the same again, including our present lives and situations.

This gives new meaning to “keep awake”. Keep awake: not to the tick tock of the clock, but to present moments. Yes, we wait with expectation to celebrate Jesus' birth, but God is with us, in the midst of us in all our moments, past, present and future.

In yesterday's newsletter I invited you to engage with an Ecumenical series from our National Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United churches. That series, and the Ascension prayers and reflections I included are about waiting – waiting with hope, peace, joy and love. Asking ourselves what hope, peace, joy and love we are waiting for. Looking for signs of those things in our world.

Advent is often a time for focusing on the concepts of waiting and expectation, of looking ahead to the Incarnation with hope.

Waiting, expectation, anticipation is complicated, though.

It is particularly complicated when we are faced with expecting end times, and chaos, and suffering such as we have described in our Gospel passage today, and in the midst of the suffering in our world. It is complicated regardless of what we are facing though, as it puts us in the future instead of the present. We, in our humanity, want to anticipate, we want to prepare ourselves, to wonder where we will find God.

If we wonder where we will find God, this places God in the future, and leaves us waiting in the present for that future to unfold. The problem in this lies in the fact we are in one place, anticipating and expecting, and God is in another. This is how expectation can function if we're not careful: we are looking to the future, instead of being in the present.

As I said, though, there is a present “keeping awake” that God invites us into. How do we do that, though? How do we wait, and do it in a way that doesn't have us feeling that we're in one place and God is in another?

My husband Randy is full of little “pearls of wisdom”. Statements that are funny, yet very wise. Randy will often say to me when I am setting out for a class or a

meeting or even a social gathering, “Aim low, then you won’t be disappointed.” This is about managing expectations. We laugh about it, but there is an opportunity to understand aiming low in a different way. Aiming low when we are talking about God, and life found in Jesus might seem counterintuitive. You might find yourself thinking “How can I do anything but aim high when God is involved?” What aiming low can mean, though, is “Be present. Live in the now.” When Randy says to me “Aim low” he doesn’t mean anticipate that things will not go well; rather, he means, don’t put yourself in the future, be in the present. “Aim low” can mean don’t be so focused on what we are expecting that we miss the present. “Aim low” can also mean “don’t let expectation of anguish or suffering become separated from the abiding hope we have in the assurance that Jesus’s word will not pass away”.

Advent is a season of preparation: we wait – expect, anticipate – God’s Incarnation in Jesus. This waiting and preparing and expecting: it’s not for an event that will explain away or remove suffering. It’s not for God to parachute in and save the day. We live in hope of the ultimate redemption in the world to come, but in the meantime, Jesus is Emmanuel: “God with us”. So, we prepare this season to invite God into all our emotions. We invite God to be born – embodied – in us, in our actions, each of us in our own way, in our own small corner of the world.

In a few minutes we’ll have an opportunity to generate our WordCloud for this week. This week, we’re guided by the questions:

What hope are you waiting for? What signs of hope do you see in the world?

We need to acknowledge that we have hopes that are yet unfulfilled. I’ve said to you before that life is full of “and”: hope and despair, peace and unrest, joy and sorrow, fear and love. Naming our hopes and dreams – the things we are longing for – it’s part of our humanity. We need to do that naming. We are not alone when we do it, though. Looking for signs of hope in the world reminds us that we are not alone. We are not alone – we are here, with each other, and God is with us, in all our moments.

I pray that this Advent we will aim low in a way that reminds us of God with us, in all our emotions, in all things. I pray that we will all keep awake to the present moment. In these weeks ahead, rather than the tick tock of the clock, may we hear the whisper of God’s presence in all our moments – God with us, now and always. In Jesus’ name. Amen.