

First Sunday in Advent
"Waiting with Hope"
Romans 13:11-14 and Mt. 24:37-44

In today's Gospel we just heard Jesus say,

"Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day I will come again.

But understand this:

If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming,
he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

So you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

I don't know how these words sound to you. Maybe you've heard them so often that the words just roll over you.

Or, maybe they they have a different effect. Maybe they startle you or jar you.

Let's be honest, do you like thinking of Jesus as a thief coming in the middle of the night?

Here we are, still enjoying and extended Thanksgiving weekend,
and our thoughts are beginning to turn to the joys of celebrating Christmas.

Some might say,

"Why do we have to hear these Advent words of warning?"

"Why do we need to think about Jesus' second coming, when we barely seem to have the time to think about His first coming?"

In fact, why can't we skip over Advent altogether and start celebrating Christmas a little early?
Nobody likes to wait.

I don't like to wait.

How many times have you been at a stoplight, and the light turns green, but the driver in front of you is staring down at their cell phone?

And you wait, trying hard not to reach for your horn.

Or how many times have you been grocery shopping or at a big department store,
and you end up stuck in the slowest check out line, in the whole store?

I think it would be fair to say that "waiting" is not our favorite thing to do.

But, when it comes to Jesus' promise that He will come again. We wait.

We hear again this morning, in Matthew's Gospel, the promise that our Lord will return.

This reading was chosen because the Season of Advent is a time set aside to look forward to Jesus' second coming as well as a time to remember His first coming.

But Advent seasons come and go.
Generations have passed and Jesus has not come... and we wait.

Each time we confess together the Apostle's Creed we say,
"He will come again to judge the living and the dead."

Each time we come to Holy Communion we pray for the Lord to meet us in His Holy Supper,
and we pray for His final return.

And the Bible testifies to Jesus' second coming.

John writes in his Gospel, "When he appears we shall be like him,
for we shall see him as he is."

There is no if he appears. John simply and matter of factly states, "When he appears."

Deeply imbedded in almost every book of the New Testament is the simple truth, "Jesus shall return."

And we wait.

But that's a bit of an exaggeration.
Most of the time we aren't exactly waiting for Jesus' return.
In fact, many Advent sermons skip right over this theme.

Yet we all know, that without the expectation of Jesus' return
Christianity would not have much hope to offer.

To limit all that God promises to what we have right now is a depressing thought.

We all hope for something better- a world free from war, starvation, and suffering...free from sickness, broken relationships, and death.

We want what God has to offer us. And still it eludes us.
Even if we were somehow able to jump right over Advent and start celebrating Christmas, many of us would still feel an emptiness inside ...an emptiness, that tells us something is not right.

Have you ever heard someone share these thoughts during the Holidays?

"I just don't know where the money is going to come from next year. It seems like things just keep getting tighter and tighter."

or

"I hate feeling this way, but it happens every year at this time. I remember those years when everyone came home for Christmas, and now it feels so lonely."

or

"I just wish our family was closer. It seems to hurt even more at Christmas to hear the arguments and fights."

So, as this emptiness settles over us, we listen, and we wait for a word of hope. We want to know what God has to offer us. We want to know if his promises are true. Will they make a difference in our life? Just what does Jesus' return mean for our lives today?

First of all, it means that God will not abandon us.

Even when our life looks hopeless, when emptiness tears away at us Jesus' return means that God has a plan to rescue us from the hostile forces of this world.

Loneliness, depression, financial difficulty, broken relationships, and grief, do not have the last word.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Luke, that even the signs of the end of the world are signs of hope.

He says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption (your "rescue") is drawing near." ¹

This is Jesus' message to each of us who are waiting for a word of hope. God, who is faithful to his promises will rescue us. God's love for us will have the last word.

Paul tells us the same thing in Romans when he writes,
 "Nothing ... nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

God will never abandon you.

When we realize that God's love is in control,
 and we can trust his promises today and everyday, something amazing happens.

Our future hope in Jesus' return
 becomes a hope we can live in each day.

Our future hope, becomes a present hope.

If you are going through a dark time right now, God wants you to hold on to this promise:
God will never abandon you.

And now the second promise we can hang on to is this:
 God will sustain us from day to day.
 God's work through Jesus Christ will finally defeat all the forces
 that steal our joy and strength.

Loneliness and depression may press in on us,
 but they cannot defeat us.
 Financial difficulty, family separation, and grief
 can fill our lives with pain and suffering,
 but they cannot separate us from God's Spirit, which sustains us each day.

When the death of a loved one fills us with grief,
 we discover that God is a very present help in our time of need.

Our future hope in Jesus' return
 becomes a life-giving day to day hope that sustains us when nothing else can.

George Johnson, a pastor from Circle Pines, Minnesota needed this message of hope.
 Listen to what he wrote an issue of the "Lutheran" several years ago:

"My brother is dying. He's only 66. Retired one year. Always in
 good health, Ray remembers missing only two and a half days of work from illness.

Four years ago doctors discovered cancer in his prostate. They were confident they could fight
 it and win. So was Ray.

But it wasn't to be.

Part of me wants to deny it, run from it, pretend it isn't so.

I am anxious not only about the separation from Ray but also about my own death. How will I be when my final hour arrives?

My wife and I hug each other more these days. The singing and the music at church means more to me. A note from a member saying, "I care," comes at the right moment.

My brother is dying.

I know that death does not have the last word. My anchor of hope is in Jesus who also went through death, but today I need to grieve. I need to weep. I need to express my anger, my hurt, my questions. I need a hug, a moment to be human, a word, a song, a smile.

In touches of love, Jesus comes to me.

My brother is dying.

But I sense a resurrection taking place within me.

Something new is happening as I grieve. I am not alone. ²

I wanted to share his story with you because it is such a powerful example of what a difference hope can make in the face of death, a hope inspired by Jesus' death and resurrection and sustained by his promise to come again.

God's faithfulness can be seen in this man's witness.

Grief and death did not have the last word. God had rescued him from their power.

So this Advent season we have the assurance that waiting on God will bring us a Word of hope...

a hope that:

1. God will never abandon us, and
2. that God will sustain us through any trial.

As we wait, remembering these two promises makes all the difference. The question is not if Jesus will come again, but when.

And finally, while we wait, we remember how Jesus told us only that we will not know what day or what hour to expect his return.

This means that we are to await Jesus' return with an attitude of watchfulness. He says, "Stay awake. Be ready."

Jesus tells us to live each day with our hearts turned and ready for his coming.

That's what the Apostle Paul meant in today's 2nd reading, when he wrote,
 "Put on or clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus,
 and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

I encourage you this morning to live in that new reality.
 Live in the hope and assurance of Jesus' return.
 Live in the joy of preparing for the Christ, born in Bethlehem,
 the Christ who already knows you, who loves you,
 and who gave his life for you. Amen.

Will you please join me in a word of prayer.

Lord, your love for us is so great.

You claim us in baptism as your precious children.

You promise to be with us...and never to abandon us.

You promise to sustain us from day to day,
 especially when we are hurting or feel alone.

Lord, we praise your name
 and thank you for desiring a relationship with us.

Help us to see the love you have for us
 and help us to prepare our hearts for your coming again.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹ Lk.21:28

² November 13, 1991 The Lutheran