



# *First Sunday in Advent*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 27 November 2022

### READINGS

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

## *Waking up to the Gifts of Simplicity*

Perhaps Advent is like this. Three teenagers stay home alone while mom and dad go away for a few days. The responsible one is in charge. Uber Eats is not an option but the fridge is full. Day one goes well. The next day they fight and alliances are formed. On Saturday things get messy. Dishes pile up in the kitchen. And in the lounge. On Sunday they all sleep in late. They are supposed to put away the laundry, tidy up the house and wash the dishes, but of course they don't. All day it's Netflix, YouTube and gaming. (These events are purely fictional and any resemblance to any person or family you may know is entirely coincidental).

By that evening they're really missing their parents. And not just because the food is finished. The house feels empty and rather lonely. They know that when mom and dad return, everything will feel right again. Order will be restored. The littlest one peeks out the curtain, looking out for the red car. They wait. They're coming ... the little one sees the car lights stop outside the house. They hear the car doors close. The sound of the latch on the gate. Footsteps and keys...

QUICK! Mom's home! What happens next?

Well, it's Advent, so I can't tell you for sure because it hasn't happened yet, but it is happening. What felt like hours is now only seconds as the middle child hides the laundry under the bed and the oldest one tries to look innocent with his hands in a sink full of dishwasher. They're feeling relieved, and happy, and excited, but they know they'll also be held to account for the messy floors, the unfinished chores and the general state of chaos.

The door handle turns, mom and dad just on the other side...

When I read today's examples from the Gospel of Matthew, this is the picture of Advent that forms in my mind.

This week's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans 13:11,12 brings us the perfect words with which to open the season of Advent:

*"you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light"*

During Advent, we light our four candles signifying the coming light of Christ. This is so much more than a countdown to Christmas. We look with joy at the incarnation and how that event of “God-made-flesh” transforms our understanding of who we are and of Whose we are. And as we usher in this season, we also look beyond. With the lighting of each candle we sense the closeness of God’s kingdom. It is captured in two words: imminence with an i, as it is arriving now-now as South Africans say, and immanence with an a, as in permanently present, infused in all that is around us.

The Realm of God is among us and between us and within us. In some ways so tangible, and in others just beyond our grasp ... ever present and yet always arriving. Our hearts and minds grasp on to a future promise beyond the world as we know it, to the world as it could be - a place of healing, justice, and peace. We do expect a culminating event, we call it a day of judgement, but it is also a day for the restoration of all creation. I don’t mean for my everyday mundane little story to trivialise the breath-taking moment when Christ will reappear, or to minimise what calling to account and judgement awaits. I just want to state that that’s not the whole story.

When reading today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew, so many of us are filled with fear. This has been fed by books, TV series and movies focusing on what people call “end times” along with detailed references to the rapture and a 7-year tribulation and many apocalyptic doomsday predictions. These are largely based on misreadings of Scripture, of the book of Revelation, the first letter to the Thessalonians, and even of today’s gospel passage. There is no Biblical evidence for any of it.

Jesus’ own advice is not to create timetables or end-time scenarios. They are always wrong, they are destructive for individuals and communities, and dangerous for the wellbeing of our planet.

We need not wait for a world-transforming catastrophe to bring us a sign. Christians have been living in what they perceived as “end times” for the past 2000 years. Waiting for what Bruce Epperly calls “a divine rescue operation” is the worst thing we can do if we want to experience God right now. What did Jesus say then? What are we to wait for and what are we to do in the meantime (the in-between time)? This passage in Matthew’s gospel is part of a long, scary passage that addresses a people who will feel deserted, who will lose their sense of certainty and question the meaning of faith after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It falls in a line of stories about staying awake, prepared and ready.

What do we do in the meantime? We siblings of the church keep our house clean. We share our food. We turn the lights on. Pay attention. How often are God’s people distracted, spending a whole lot of time playing games or doing whatever the church’s equivalent is of watching Netflix for our own entertainment? “Keep awake,” Jesus says. Stay awake. Bruce Epperly says that Holy moments may catch you by surprise. Don’t miss the God-moments occurring throughout the day, and the way that God comes to us in every encounter.

During Advent we remind ourselves that awakening to God and living in God’s Realm is available all the time. We ought to pay attention to what we could be doing now to be ushers and heralds of the peace and wholeness of the Realm of God.