

Sacred Time

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 27, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 24:36-44](#) and [Romans 13:11-14](#)

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The official story goes something like this: At the beginning of time, God created the heavens and the earth. And at the end of time, God will judge the nations and the peoples and recreate the heavens and the earth.

I'm not sure if I buy the official story, though I will say that there are days when the official story gives me hope. If we don't solve the climate crisis, and the ecosystems the earth go to hell in a handbasket – which would be a certain level of automatic judgment, in my not-so-humble opinion – then the storyline of God performing some sort of reset brings an element of hope for me. Most of the time, however, I don't pay much attention to or worry about whether or not God has a plan for how things will end, and if there is a plan, what the details are.

Still, apocalyptic literature like our gospel reading today is certainly a part of Christianity's legacy. Historically, Advent has been seen as a season that reminds us that we live in a time between times, that we live between the two great creation narratives of God's first creation and of God's pending recreation of the heavens and the earth. And not only between the two great creation narratives, but we also live between the first and second coming of Jesus.

Our reading from Matthew 24 comes from a section of the gospel that is a collection of sayings and parables about the second coming of Jesus, about a day of judgment that will inaugurate this new creation, the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. In today's reading, Jesus warns that this day will take the world by surprise. Just like the last time God hit the reset button, back in the time of Noah, people were going about their business with no awareness of God's impending judgment. Then whoosh. When that day comes, people will be like householders who fail to, or can't anticipate when, the burglar will break in. In two words, Jesus' message is, *be ready*.

Christians have had a hard time making sense of this. A theology of a pending rapture is actually a fairly new attempt to make sense of all this. It's only about 200 years old, and there's plenty of criticism out there as to why it's bad theology. Another line of thinking is that the day of judgment happens to each of us when we die and so it's happening in millions of small ways all the time.

I fall into yet another school of thought. This school of thought says it's not important to try to figure out the details of a divine judgment that may or may not come at some future date. What's important is to live in this moment, to recognize God's radical claim on us here and now. So I live asking myself if I am living in the way of Jesus. And I don't stop there, because the question about living in the way of Jesus is not about God's judgment of me. It's about getting better at living in the new day that has already dawned at the first coming of Jesus, at his birth, life, death, and resurrection.

We live in a sacred time that is already filled with the presence of God – the God made known in Jesus, the God experienced in the awe and beauty of creation, the God who empowers us to love even our enemies.

I realized that all this is quite theologically abstract, so let's get down to brass tacks (which is a strange expression, but I won't go down that rabbit hole). Rather than a passage inviting us into a perpetual state of anxiety worrying about when and how the world will end, and rather than being a passage inviting us into a deep sleep of apathy brought on by the realization that we can't know the day or the hour, I think this passage invites us to be awake. Maybe Jesus isn't saying so much "be ready" as he's saying "be awake."

"Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming," Matthew tells us Jesus said. "... you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep ... the night is far gone, the day is near," Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. I find myself wondering how we can be awake without falling into anxiety or apathy.

If you were with us for worship last week, you may remember that I shared Brother David Steindl-Rast's technique for developing a grateful heart: Stop; Look; Go. Brother David says that at any moment in any circumstance, we can stop being part of the circumstance and look at it. Then, by looking at it more deeply, we can discern the opportunity we are being offered in that moment in that circumstance: the opportunity for awe, or for joy, or for compassion, or for action, or for love. It is in those opportunities that Brother David says we can find reasons to be thankful – no matter the circumstances – and, then we can go express that gratitude. And when we notice reasons to be thankful, choose gratitude, and express that gratitude, we develop a grateful heart.

I'm thinking we can utilize these three steps in a slightly different way to be awake – an engaged (not apathetic) awakesness; a calm (not anxious) awakesness. First, we stop; we step out of the busy-ness of the moment (and this is a season filled with busy moments). Then we look. And rather than looking for the opportunity the moment is offering, we look for the presence (or at least evidence of the presence) of the holy, the divine. And then we can go on, carrying that awareness with us, helping us understand that that moment was sacred. And if we stop and look again, we will notice that this next moment is sacred. And if we make a practice of this, we will notice that, in fact, all time is sacred.

Last night, I was getting a little antsy; I'd been sitting at the computer too long, so I went for a little walk. I decided to stop paying attention to how cold it was or how a streetlight was out, and instead to look for evidence of the presence of God. As soon as I looked for it, I found it. Two neighbors, in different directions from my home, have decorated their yards with lights. I noticed they both have very similar (perhaps even identical) light-up signs that say "Joy." And I thought, *Surely, if these neighbors both want to express joy and encourage joy, that is a sign of the presence of God.* At another moment I noticed a dog barking and then I heard someone calling out across the fence between their driveways to a neighbor, making sure the neighbor knew something. Though I didn't make out the words, the tone of voice carried, a tone of caring and reassurance. Surely, God is present in that caring.

Years ago, a colleague shared a story about being in a parishioner's kitchen an hour or so after he died. "His wife was in the living room with his body," Matt said. "Their teenaged daughter, a church friend, and I were at the kitchen table. We tried to speak comfort to one another, but we'd run out of things to say. We sat in silence. To me it felt like we were waiting. But waiting for what? The funeral home was due to take away the body. That would only make things worse.

"Then the doorbell rang and a plumber stepped in. An hour earlier the hospice nurse had followed [what was then the] protocol and flushed all of the dead man's medications down the drain. This broke the toilet. The plumber knew none of this. He just walked into raw grief, a pastor out of words, a reeling family, and the recently deceased right there in the living room. He could have run straight to the bathroom. But he didn't.

"He shook my hand, looked the teenaged daughter straight in the eyes, and told the grieving widow that he knew what a good man her husband was. As he made his rounds something in the room turned. For a moment the pain broke and became something else. Or at least the pain was met by a power that promised it would not last forever."¹

It wasn't so much in the moment itself that Matt was conscious of the presence of God. It was later, looking back, years after the experience itself, that he could clearly articulate the sacredness of that time with the plumber. "Grace comes in the most unlikely guise" he said. "Christ comes when we least expect him. 'Like a thief in the night.' Or a plumber at a deathbed."² Amen.

¹ Matt Fitzgerald, "Like a Plumber at a Deathbed," *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional*, email from the United Church of Christ, 6 June 2015.

² *Ibid.*