

3 Advent Imperatives: Keep Awake, Understand, Be Ready

Matthew 24:36-44

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I.

As many of you know, “Advent” means “beginning,” so it is a fitting name for the season that starts or inaugurates or launches the Christian liturgical calendar. Historically called “the little Lent,” Advent is a season of preparation for the first great feast of the Christian year, the Feast of the Incarnation, aka Christmas.

During Advent, Christians set a special intention to prepare their hearts and their homes, as well as the church itself, to receive anew the story of the birth of Jesus, whom Christians confess as the Messiah, or Christ, the holy one anointed to embody God’s presence in and on behalf of the earth.

But Advent does not just mean beginning. It more nearly means “coming.”

The word Advent comes from the Latin word “veni,” as in “Veni, veni Emmanuel,” or “Come, o come, Emmanuel.”

In Spanish, you hear it in the command “Ven!” or “Vena qui!” or, as my Ecuadorian host parents would say, “Ven, Ben!”

Advent has a dual quality to it. On the one hand, Christians mark the beginning of the Christian witness by placing themselves in a position to hear the words of ancient prophets and prepare themselves for the great message of the incarnation of Emmanuel, or “God with us.”

On the other hand, Christians await the coming of Christ, the culmination of history, the renewal of the earth through a second incarnation when all the earth will be flooded with the presence of God’s love and justice.

Theologian Karl Barth said we are living in-between advents, in-between the first coming and second coming.

The Advent question, then, is, what do we do during this in-between time?

How do we cultivate hope within our homes, within the church, and within the wider world while we rekindle the story of the first advent and look forward with longing toward the second?

II.

Perhaps you recognized some of the verses that are part of this morning’s Gospel reading.

It begins, “But about that day and hour no one knows.”

One thing I love about the lectionary texts assigned during Advent is that they move unapologetically against the grain of our consumer culture.

While our entire economy begins to lurch and groan in the direction of anxious acquisition, the lectionary texts offer strange verses about judgment.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus goes apocalyptic on the disciples. In just a few terse verses, Jesus reaches way back to the time of Noah and then way forward to what he calls "the coming of the Son of Man."

In other words, while our entire culture is anxious about whether we have enough time and money to buy this or that gift for this or that person, gifts we will scarcely remember having given by this time next year, Jesus invokes vast millennia as a way of trying to get the disciples, and the rest of us, to wake up to the grander meaning of this and every moment.

"Remember the time of Noah?" Jesus says, "People were running around going to holiday parties and decorating the church and shopping online and eating too much sugar, and all the while a storm was brewing."

Despite our attempts to turn the Noah story into a cute children's book, or an awesome whimsical sculpture, it's a story with an edge to it, an edge that Jesus sharpens in our text today.

He is trying to get his disciples ready, to make them alert to the coming challenges.

This is not business as usual, Jesus tells them.

It might look like it. Two men will be in the field, two women grinding meal.

Suddenly there will be only one.

Jesus might as well be quoting Nobel laureate Bob Dylan: "For the times, they are a changin'."

Some Christians have used these verses, setting them alongside other verses pulled from elsewhere in the Bible, to create a fear-based theology warning that unless you believe the right things in the right way, you will be left behind.

These verses in Matthew are where that "left behind" concept comes from.

I think this is a perfect example of how Christian scriptures can be interpreted in a way that expresses the exact opposite of what they intended.

None other than the Buddha described this phenomenon in the Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake.

The Buddha said, in essence, "My teachings are like a venomous snake. You need to be careful how you pick them up. If you pick them up the wrong way, they will bite you."

And then he describes in detail the better way to catch a snake: "You take a forked stick and place it behind the snake's head. Then you can pick up the snake just below the stick and it will not be able to bite you."

In other words, the Buddha is saying, my teachings cannot just be picked up any ol' way, can't just be grabbed wily nily.
Everything depends on how you pick them up.

III.

In these verses from the 24th chapter of Matthew, Jesus sprinkles clues on how to pick up his words.

In fact, if you follow the verbs, he tells you exactly what to do with his teaching, because they are not just verbs, they are imperative verbs, and there are three of them.

"Keep awake" is the first one.

Jesus knew about the human tendency to settle in to familiar ways, to remain within the bubble of the comfortable, to block out everything that doesn't fit into one's known universe.

Jesus knew that the only difference between a rut and a grave is the dimensions.

So he said, "Keep awake."

You don't know what day or what moment God is going to show up and shake up your known existence.

Better to be awake when it happens so that you can respond accordingly.

Otherwise, you might miss it altogether.

If a snake suddenly slithers across your slumbering path, you might just reach down to toss it out of the way and get bit in the process.

Keep awake to the newness of God – don't just go through the motions like Noah's neighbors did – because there's no guarantee the person next to you right now will be there tomorrow.

Things change, and can change suddenly, so keep awake.

The second imperative is "understand."

You've got a brain, Jesus says, so use it.

In 2012, my wife, Brooke, and our two kids, Marin and Sophia, were in South Africa on sabbatical.

While in Durban enjoying a day at the beach, we wanted some ice cream, but first we needed to get some cash from an ATM.

Looking back, I should have known the man trying to be helpful was out to rob us.

His partner distracted Brooke while they got not only my card but my PIN.

How could I be so stupid? I can still feel it, viscerally, in my body.

"Understand this," Jesus said: "If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into."

Yeah, but that "if he had known" is pretty crucial.

If I had known how I was going to get robbed, I wouldn't have let it happen.

Well, now I know.

Understand this, Jesus says, seek the truth, learn from your mistakes, so that when the unexpected happens you'll know what to do next.

If we heed the first imperative, to keep awake to the possibility of God's newness, and the second, to understand that newness when it comes, now Jesus offers the third imperative in a way that full of paradox.

The third and final imperative is "be ready."

"You must be ready," he says, "because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Having returned to live in California after 17 years in the high country of Colorado, I have found myself thinking about earthquakes again.

My family and I were in Santa Cruz a few weeks ago and we drove past the very spot where, as a high school senior, I was driving at 5:04 p.m. on October 17.

At that moment in 1989, I thought my car had a flat tire.

Then I thought it had four flat tires.

Then I noticed that brick chimneys were crumbling all around me and I actually had this thought: "I don't think my flat tires are making those chimneys crumble."

Earthquakes happen, especially in places like California.

We need to be ready, even though we do not know when they will happen, nor how mild or devastating they will be.

What kind of readiness is Jesus talking about?

How can you be ready for something, like an earthquake or the coming of the Son of Man, that could happen at any moment, and that could be delayed for a long time?

It seems to me that what Jesus is after in all three of these imperatives – keep awake, understand, be ready – is to get his disciples, then and now, to be sufficiently nimble and flexible in our thinking.

He is preparing them, and us, to expect the unexpected, to wait actively for the coming of God at a day and a time, and in a way, that will be completely unprecedented.

"Keep awake," he says, to the possibility of God's newness, so that when it comes you won't be too numb or groggy or cynical to notice.

"Understand," Jesus teaches, so that you'll have a framework to draw upon when it happens, and so that your entire life experience will inform your response.

Finally, Jesus encourages his disciples, "be ready for the coming of the Son of Man at an unexpected hour," so that when that hour comes, your thinking will be nimble enough, your imagination free enough, your creativity flexible enough, your judgment gracious enough to adjust to the brand new circumstances created by God's advent.

IV.

But remember, don't get bit by the snake.

It matters how we pick up these words.

On this first Sunday in Advent, the purpose of these words is not to breed fear, but to cultivate hope.

If we pick them up thinking they are concerned exclusively with the afterlife for individuals according to a pie-in-the-sky dispensationalist fantasy, we are likely to stoke anxiety and fear.

But if we pick them up to keep awake, to understand, and to be ready for God's coming in the midst of our everyday life, they might have the power to cultivate much needed hope.

Did you notice in these verses how worldly, how incarnational this language is?

Beginning with the story of Noah, Jesus words are all about the events of life, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.

God's newness is coming into the midst of our everyday activities like eating and drinking, and into special occasions like weddings and funerals.

Whether working in the field or in the home, when God's newness comes it will change our relationships and routines.

And it can come at any time, during the transparent glare of midday, or under the foreboding shadows of night.

Jesus' imperatives to keep awake, to understand, to be ready, are meant to nurture flexible enough thinking for us to recognize the coming of Christ today in the most unexpected of ways – in the challenging person or surprising circumstance right in front of us.

Perhaps this is the creative thinking that Advent prepares in us – to imagine Christ's coming not in the fixed and fearful forms of fundamentalism, but in the open opportunities to adopt God's newness for ourselves.

So, keep awake to the ruts you might be in.

Understand the best you can why things happen the ways they do.

Be ready for the unexpected by keeping your thinking nimble and responsive.

Three Advent imperatives that can help us hear a fourth imperative, "hope," as in, "People of Advent, hope, hope as if your life depended upon it, which it most surely does." Amen.