

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, NC
Robert Alexander
“Prepare the Way: Be Ready!”
Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44
1st Sunday of Advent – Year A
November 27, 2016**

Happy New Year! As Mary Margaret reminded us last Sunday – today – the 1st Sunday of Advent - is the first Sunday of the Church’s Liturgical Calendar. This Advent is the time that we both prepare for the celebration of the birth of the Christ-child in Bethlehem and prepare for the second coming of Christ as King and Judge.

Some scholars speak of this period that we are in as “in-between time.” We have seen and celebrate the gift of God in Jesus Christ – the one who came for the sake of the world and who gave himself so that we might have life. But God’s purposes and will for all of creation have yet to be fulfilled and so we wait, with faith, hope, and love, for the full realization of what God has done and is doing through Christ and through the church. We are invited, called, and even commanded to live in a particular way as the gospel texts remind us that God is not finished. Christ will return and the vision of peace given to Isaiah – the one we read during our candle lighting - will be fulfilled.

Jill Duffield – editor of the Presbyterian Outlook – writes that this passage highlights the mundane into which the divine invades. Eating, drinking, marrying, working in the field, doing laundry, driving to work, watching the game – nothing is off limits for the Lord’s arrival.

God comes to us in the midst of our everyday lives, without warning, and invites us to a new way of being in the world. We are invited to break from the ordinary day to day dead-end routines in order to be used in the extraordinary life-giving ways of the Sovereign Lord of Heaven and Earth. Matthew tell his community to be ready.

“Remember the time of Noah?” He says. People were going about their day-to-day business when - without warning - the flood washed everything away. So, too, with the Second Coming.

Like the one whose house was broken into by the thief...we are called to be ready for just as the homeowner didn’t know when the thief would come, we do not know when Christ will return.

And let’s face it, it is so much easier to be ready for something when we know the day and the time that it will occur. When we are getting ready for a test at school we study and prepare to be ready for a specific day. When we are giving a presentation at work we know the date that presentation will be given. When we are working with a team toward an event like the Congregational Retreat – we plan and work toward a specific date – (which happens to be January 20-22, 2017 – put it on your calendars!)

But if you don’t know the date? What if it is a pop-quiz? What if you don’t know when your presentation will be due? What if the event needs to be ready at a moment’s notice?

There was a story told at my grandfather’s funeral years ago. Colonel Albert Meredith Withers, my Papa Boo, was a dedicated church man but he was not one who felt confident praying in public. Shortly after one particular pastor arrived at the church he asked my grandfather to close a gathering in prayer. My grandfather reluctantly agreed but was not at all comfortable doing it. After that day he vowed that he would never again show up at church unprepared. Any time he was asked to pray he would stand and after asking everyone to close their eyes for prayer would pull out a prayer from his coat pocket that he had written.

When I was thinking about the question of “how to be ready” I thought of an athlete on the bench – ready to go into the game. They had practiced with the team – they were conditioned – they were rested – and now they are ready whenever the coach calls on them. “Put me in coach! I’m ready.”

I know baseball season is over but I had to think of John Fogarty’s song “Centerfield.”

(PLAY CLIP) (Put me in Coach, I’m ready to play, today.)

Fogarty once said in an interview “(This song) is about baseball, but it is also a metaphor about getting yourself motivated, about facing the challenge of one thing or another at least at the beginning of an endeavor. About getting yourself all ready, whatever is necessary for the job.”ⁱ

I read an article about how baseball players can stay ready on the bench and I think it applies to any sport and to our life of faith. It seems that being ready is not just about the physical conditioning, but about the heart and the mind as well.

1. **Talk about the game.** – Keep your mind engaged with what is going on and find others to interact with.
2. **Watch the guy playing your position.** Think about the gifts you are given and the “position” you want to play and learn from others who are in ahead of you.
3. **Stay loose.**
4. **Simulate at bats.** Stay mentally in the game by practicing what you would do in any given situation.
5. **Do not pity yourself.** Don’t focus on self but rather on the team and how you can serve the team’s needs.
6. **Seize your opportunity.** Do your best when the time comes.ⁱⁱ

This morning’s text is part of a larger discourse which is the 5th of five such sermons by Jesus in Matthew. As this morning’s text continues on into Matthew 25 we read three significant stories that help us answer the question of how we are to be ready for the biggest game of all.

- 1) (Matt. 26:1-13) The story of the 10 bridesmaids reminds us again of the unknown time of the arrival of Christ. Five of the bridesmaids in the story are ready with plenty of oil in their lamps. Five are not ready and they run out of oil and have to leave to find it elsewhere. While they are gone they miss the arrival of the groom. This suggests that our wait might be a long one and we need to prepare ourselves both physically and mentally for the wait.... taking care of ourselves so that we are fit and ready - having our house in order and not being burdened by the stuff of the world so that we have a hard time going when we are called - having the resources or the education that we need in order to respond faithfully.
- 2) (Matt. 25:14- 30) The story of the talents reminds us that God has blessed us with gifts and resources. We are invited to take the risk to invest those things so that they will bring about a return that brings glory to God. In this parable, the master returns to see how his servants have done using the gifts that were given. Those who had invested wisely were rewarded. The one who buried his gift was rebuked. What has God given you and how have you invested it? Have you invested it in the life giving things which honor God and further the things of God’s kingdom? Have you invested in those things which bring honor and glory to God or have you squandered your talents?
- 3) (Matt. 25:31-46) The final story of Matthew 25 is about the Judgement of God’s people. The Lord will come, Matthew wrote, and will separate the people based on how they treated the “least of these.” Jesus tells his followers that “whenever you have done something for one of the least of these, you have done it unto me.” We are invited to find ourselves in one of two camps – the one who joyfully served those in need, not even realizing they were serving their Lord in the process – or those who have ignored the needs of their neighbors – making excuses for reasons that they did not serve them.

David Bartlett has written that “One day Jesus may appear in the clouds, suddenly, like a thief in the night. But before that – as Matthew reminds us – Jesus will appear just around the corner, suddenly, like a hungry person, or a neighbor ill-clothed, or someone sick or imprisoned.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Just the other day I was heading into Charlotte to make some hospital visits when I saw a man approaching cars stopped at the stoplight. He was not near me and so I hoped for the light to turn green so that I would not have to “deal” with this situation. I remember thinking, “what will I do if he comes over here and beckons for me to role my window down?” I have been taught not to give cash for fear that it might be misused in some way by the recipient. I had no water or snacks in the car to give him if he was hungry or thirsty. I was on a tight schedule.

“Certainly I had a pass on this one.” I remember justifying to myself. And then the light changed and I drove on. As I reflected on this experience later that day I was left with the question... “what if that was Jesus?” “Did I just miss an opportunity to meet and serve Jesus?” Did I miss an opportunity to share his love? I realized then that I am not really ready.

My life – perhaps like yours - is often filled up with the busy-ness of the day which I tell myself is the work of God. And much of it is. But when that time comes and God calls, and my journey is interrupted – will I be ready to respond in faith and in joy to the one who is coming without any warning? Am I ready in my body, mind, and heart?

In faith, hope, and love, I hear the Lord asking me to simplify my busy life and to be ready to respond to his call in these in-between times. In Matthew I hear the invitation to not be so distracted by my mundane routines that I miss his coming into my life and miss the opportunity to participate in his kingdom work. In these stories I hear a reminder and a command. Be Ready!

The radical message of Advent is that the divine enters and assumes the mundane. Jesus is coming to save sinners and Christ will return to judge them. This should be sobering, but not scary because even if we don't know *when*, we do know *who*.

John Burgess, Theology Professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary writes that “the Christ who judges us is also the Christ who endured judgment for our sake; that God’s judgment never contradicts or overrides God’s grace; and that the readiness to which Jesus calls us is shaped not by fear of the future but rather by gratitude for life in the kingdom that Christ already offers us.”^{iv}

Today’s text offers us both a warning and an invitation into a compelling vision of what life in God’s Kingdom looks like. And even though we may not find ourselves completely ready all of the time to live this way we are invited to place ourselves by faith in the hands of a loving God who shapes us in Christ with compassion and grace to be a people about the things of God by the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

Today, as a community of faith, we celebrate the calling of an Associate Pastor for Faith Formation. This person will help us as we wrestle with the meaning of these texts and hold them in tension with our world in all of its conflict, and division, and pain, and suffering, and joy, and celebration, and life. As we live out our days we are invited to do so in the hope that scripture proclaims. God’s Word offers us a vision for what God is doing in us and in the world. May we live each day – ready to respond to the call of God with faith, hope, and love.
Are you ready?

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=707>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.keepplayingbaseball.org/staying-ready-on-the-bench/>

ⁱⁱⁱ David L. Bartlett in *Feasting on the Word: Year A: Volume 1*. (WJK. 2010) p. 24

^{iv} John P. Burgess in *Feasting on the Word: Year A: Volume 1*. (WJK. 2010) p. 24