

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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Advent: A Road Less Traveled

Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, December 1, 2013

The First Sunday of Advent—Based on Matthew 24:36-44

These past several days have reminded me of one of those places in our highway system where several smaller highways and roads converge, with lots of on-ramps and bridges, into one colossal superhighway.

One road feeding into this highway was Wednesday, the busiest travel day of the year, complete with complicating winter weather. Wednesday evening this year also began Hanukkah, the eight-day Jewish Festival of Lights. Then Thanksgiving Day, with the Macy's Parade, the rituals of gathering with family or friends for dinner, which can be delightful or can keep therapists in business for months afterward. Then the Black Friday shopping frenzy, which now seems to start on Thursday, with record sales this year. Online sales particularly, with huge numbers of people shopping from their mobile phones and tablets, were off the charts. Oh—and there were some football games, so I'm told. Tomorrow is Cyber Monday, and the tree in Rockefeller Center is ready to be lit this Wednesday evening. All these roads feeding into that great highway called the Christmas season, the Holidays.

Our cultural Christmas freeway has opened, with all ten lanes up and running! All nations shall stream to it. Only 24 shopping days 'til Christmas!

Paralleling this busy freeway runs a quiet street called Advent, with not so much traffic, lined with magnolias and evergreens, an occasional light glowing in a window. The Christian season of Advent begins today, as it always does, four Sundays before Christmas. It doesn't always fall on Thanksgiving weekend, but this year it does, just because of the way Thanksgiving and Christmas fall on the calendar. So this year, even the quiet street of Advent begins in the great Christmas highway, right under a simple sign that says: Happy New Year!

Today is New Year's Day of the Church year. That year begins with the Advent season, a season of spiritual preparation for the coming of Christ, a time of reflection and joyful expectation. We mark the season by changing to blue vestments, with simple greens on the altars, the Advent wreath, lighting a new candle on each of the four Sundays and the white candle on Christmas. Each Advent we begin reading from a different Gospel. This year we'll be reading through the Gospel of Matthew.

Right here after the warmth of Thanksgiving and amidst the Christmas season kickoff, we might wish for a more holly, jolly Gospel passage for this first Sunday of Advent—something cheery and upbeat, maybe a baby, or even the beginning chapter of Matthew's Gospel with the genealogy that traces Jesus' ancestors all the way back to Abraham. But no, we have this Gospel from the 24th chapter of Matthew. (Who starts reading a novel at the 24th chapter?)

This Gospel startles. It seems incongruous, even inconsiderate! Why start a New Year with such a text?

In the 6th century, the season of Advent (previously associated with Epiphany) came to be associated with the coming of Christ—not the coming of the Christ-child, but the Second Coming of Christ (a term that's not in the Bible, by the way). Our word "Advent" comes from the Latin *Adventus*, which means "coming," particularly the arrival of a king or emperor or governor or other important official. The Greek equivalent is *Parousia*, which has come to stand (in English) for the Second Coming of Christ.

By the Middle Ages, the Church had extended the celebration of Advent to include the coming of Christ through his birth in Bethlehem, his future coming at the end of time, and his continuing presence among us through the Holy Spirit. Our Advent season has come to refer to all three of these "advents" of Christ.

But this Gospel is about the Second Coming of Christ. When will that happen? Only God knows. (So much for those who predict a specific date.) How will it happen? It will happen during the midst of everyday activities: eating, drinking, getting married, working, Christmas shopping.

What will happen? In the midst of these everyday activities, one will be taken and one will be left. In case you're wondering, yes, these are indeed some of the verses that have given rise to what I'll call the Rapture culture: the "Left Behind" series of novels, now also movies, that deal with the End Times, Armageddon-style, in which "true believers" or "real Christians" (how do you tell?) are "raptured" (taken instantly to heaven), leaving a pile of clothes or an empty car.

This has created a big business in Rapture bumper stickers. I don't know if we have these in NYC, but I saw them when I lived in Texas: "Warning: In case of Rapture, this truck will be empty." "After the Rapture, I'm taking your truck."

I don't subscribe to the Rapture theory, and I don't believe it will enlighten us to delve into it here. However, here's something to think about: It's fairly widely accepted that those who are taken are the "good ones" or "true believers," and those who are left are those who didn't measure up somehow. Just so you know, there's not complete agreement among scholars about whether it's better to be taken or to be left!

At the heart of this gospel from Matthew is "Keep awake! Be ready!" Not in order to worry about whether we will be taken or left—worrying about that is NOT being awake or ready. There are some clues in the rest of Matthew about what it means to be ready, glimpses of what wide-awake living looks like. See if you recognize them:

Love your enemies. (5:43-48)
Pray as Jesus taught us to pray. (6:9-14)
Don't judge others. (7:1-5)
I was hungry, and you gave me food.
I was thirsty, and you gave me drink.
I was a stranger, and you took me in.
I was sick, and you visited me.
I was in prison, and you came to me. (25:35-40)

It's easy to become absorbed in our own everyday lives, in our work, the needs of our families, in our eating and drinking (especially at this time of year!). It's easy to be distracted by many things.

It's harder to keep awake. It's harder to be mindful, to live mindfully. Yet that's what this gospel asks us to do. That's what the season of Advent can help us practice. Because God might show up without an appointment.

I belong to St. Bart's *Living Christ Sangha*, which is a meditation practice and community that meets every Sunday afternoon upstairs. A large part of our time is spent sitting together in silent meditation, trying to be mindful simply of our breathing. We've learned to start breathing and counting: IN ONE, OUT ONE, IN TWO, OUT TWO ... up to ten, and then start over. Whenever we become aware that our mind has wandered off from our breathing, we start over at ONE. It sounds easy, but most of us don't get beyond THREE or FOUR. Starting over at ONE isn't a punishment, but rather a reminder that always we can begin again.

Always we can begin again. When we get distracted—and we will because we're human—we can become aware of that and then turn our attention back to trying to live mindfully, so that we can meet Christ when Christ comes into our lives.

So that we can meet Christ ... the Christ we promise to seek and serve in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

So that we can meet the Christ, the "Coming One" ... who doesn't come on our schedule.

The Christ, the "Coming One" ... the one who has come and who continues to come to us in the quiet street of Advent, and in the busy superhighway. The one who comes to us in the faces of those we love and those we find hard to love. The one who comes to us in our gatherings around Word and Sacrament.

The Christ who comes to us.

O come, o come, Emanuel.