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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/25/2016, The First Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text speaks of readiness. We are to be ready for the Second Coming of Jesus. In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus says this:

Therefore you also must be *ready*, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matthew 24:44, NRSV)

A key word here is the adjective "unexpected" — an *unexpected* hour. That means that for each of us, the return of Jesus might slip up on us. It might catch us unawares. And so the safest path is to be found ready *all the time!* We are to live each day, each hour, each moment as if it is worthy of being the moment of Christ's return.

I happened to grow up in a church that preached a lot about the Second Coming of Jesus. This Sunday's Gospel Lesson is from Matthew 24. Earlier in that chapter, Jesus speaks of lightning. He is describing how sudden and dramatic his Second Coming will be:

For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.
(Matthew 24:27, NRSV)

So, when I was a boy and there was a thunderstorm, I would listen for the last trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52) and, with an intense mixture of hope and fear, I would expect to see Jesus split the sky and come again in beauty and power. You can see a lot of the sky down there on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. You can see thunderstorms rumbling in from a great distance off. As those storms approached, I would think of Christ. I would measure myself and try to figure out how I would stand at the Last Judgment. Usually I was rather pessimistic about it — my standing at the Last Judgment — but it did not much matter one way or the other because that thunderstorm was approaching and there was little I could do about it then and there. The winds would blow, the corn would bend, the lightning would illumine the brooding sky, and I would wait for Jesus to appear. He has not appeared so far, but I will be very glad when he does.

I don't think young people think about such things much anymore, and that is probably for the good.

And yet, we can never turn away from our Lord's call to us to be ready!

Therefore you also must be *ready*, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matthew 24:44, NRSV)

In this sermon, I want to explore our Lord's call to be ready. Jesus is coming again, at an unexpected hour. We should try to be ready for him. Yet, I wonder whether this might be true: that our best *strategy* for being ready for the return of Christ is to somehow *forget* about the return of Christ. I do not mean that we should *doubt* that Christ will come again. Not that! Not a drop of doubt about that! Rather, I am suggesting that life is busy, and you and I have many duties and responsibilities in life. We have many opportunities to love God and to love one another. Maybe our best strategy for being ready for the return of Christ, then, is simply to turn to our duties and opportunities with Christian love and simplicity. We will entrust the day of Christ's return to the Triune God. As for us, we mean to concentrate on the opportunities of love that lie before us.

And so, going back to those childhood thunderstorms on the Eastern Shore, instead of staring at the approaching storm and wondering how I would do at the Last Judgment, it probably would have been better for me to check on the windows of the house, to make sure they were shut, and to check on the kittens, to make sure they were safe in the barn. That sort of thing. Jesus is coming, one way or the other. When he comes, let us be found taking care of the kittens and so on.

Let me try to fill out the meaning of being ready for the return of Christ by referring to some stories and verses in the Bible.

First off, from the Old Testament, we have the story of the three Jewish young men in the burning, fiery furnace (Daniel 3). It is a highpoint of the liturgical year for many of us when Chris Schulze reads for us the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego during the Easter Vigil. There we are in the darkened church, with some candles to keep us going, and Chris reads that story aloud for us with his strong voice and dramatic way. The part I like best is when the three youths give their bold answer to King Nebuchadnezzar. He has threatened to throw them into the burning, fiery furnace unless they bow down and worship his golden statue. But they refuse, with these valiant words:

¹⁷If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. ¹⁸But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up. (Daniel 3:17-18, NRSV)

Into the fire they go! They are saved by One who has the appearance of a god (Daniel 3:25), which causes King Nebuchadnezzar to change his mind about the whole matter. So, it is a story of victory for the LORD, the God of Israel.

But what I want to do is to focus on the brave answer the three lads gave. I think it is a model for us about what it means to be ready for the return of Jesus. At the moment they give their brave answer, they do not know whether they will survive or not. But they do not care one way or the other. As for them, they mean to be faithful in the present moment. The rest they will leave to the LORD.

Likewise with us: The Second Coming of Jesus Christ will come at an unexpected moment. We do not know when. We might not be good at guessing. Christ is coming again, and there are some uncertainties connected with that, but to be ready for that great day, it is probably best that we focus on our present moment, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego:

¹⁸But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up. (Daniel 3:17-18, NRSV)

Whatever others do, come, O come! let us walk with Jesus in this present life that lies before us.

So, that is a Bible story from the Old Testament. It teaches us to be true to the LORD even when the outcome is uncertain.

Next, let me lift up what is for me one of the simplest and most appealing exhortations in the New Testament. It comes from St. Paul. He urges us to not grow weary:

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (Galatians 6:9, KJV)

This is a verse that has an eye to the future. It speaks of “due season”: “...in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.” In its future orientation, it is akin to this morning’s saying about the Son of Man returning at an unexpected hour.

But the tone of St. Paul’s verse is peaceful and reassuring. He is not threatening us, as if to say, “Shape up. Jesus might soon return.” It is more along the lines of saying to weary people:

Do not give up. Someday, you will reap. Someday, the truth of your lives will be proclaimed before the universe. For now, your faithfulness might be overlooked by the whole, wide world, and yet, someday your good deeds will be recognized. They will be evident before the world, the

angels, and our holy God himself. Do not think you labor in vain.

So, let us not grow weary in well doing. That is how we are best prepared for the Second Coming of Jesus. That is how we are best ready for his return: pressing on with good deeds, continuing with well doing.

The final example of what it means to be ready for the return of Jesus is the example of Jesus himself. We find our best selves in him! We are at our best on earth when we are like him. And what is he like? Well, he continues his good path in face of present dangers and in face of future sorrows. Let the present be bad and the future unpromising: Jesus continues his goodness anyway!

That is exactly what he did when some Pharisees came to Jesus to warn him that King Herod meant to put him to death. You recall that conversation, I bet. It includes the word “fox”:

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. ³³Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following... (Luke 13:31-33, RSV)

Jesus has already told his disciples that he will be rejected in Jerusalem, suffer and die in that town. So, his future is dark and his present is threatening because Herod means to kill him. Chaos surrounds him. Bad news breathes upon him. But Jesus perseveres on his path. He does not become downhearted. He does not give up. There are still demons to be cast out and cures to be performed and hearts to be comforted. So, Jesus weathers all the bad news and simply continues on his good path.

He would have us do the same. That is how he would like to find us when he comes again. Things might be good for us, or they might be bad. We might be enjoying a season of peace, or we might be beset by troubles. Who can know all the pressures upon you nowadays? Who can know all the setbacks and sorrows with which you struggle? But we can know this: Jesus will indeed come again. And when he comes, he will know every speck of the good you have been trying to do. Indeed, you might well find that Jesus has been taking your good deeds, even when you were weary to the bone, and using them as building blocks for his kingdom.

Our text says, Be ready. It does not say, Be happy or Be sad. It simply says, Be ready for Jesus. Be ready for the truth of our lives to be revealed. Be ready, so that Jesus can say, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been

faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." Be ready, for your Saviour is at hand, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.