

The Very Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
Advent 1, Year A
November 27, 2022
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

The Armor of Light

Happy New Year's Day of the new church year! Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, we begin a new liturgical year.

In the Revised Common Lectionary, which we and many other Christian communions follow together in a three-year cycle of readings, Years A, B, and C, last Sunday we wound up Year C. And today we commence Year A once more. Last year in Year C our gospel companion was Luke. This year our gospel companion is Matthew.

As author and scholar Alexander John Shaia reminds us, each year, over the four Sundays of Advent, we encounter the same categories of gospel readings. This year those come to us from Matthew's perspective.

The first Sunday of Advent always brings a text with an emphatic reminder to wake up or to keep awake. The second and third Sundays of Advent always bring us gospel texts about John the Baptizer, cousin and forerunner of Jesus. John is viewed differently by the different gospel writers. And the fourth Sunday of Advent lays out the message of the year's path ahead from the point of view of either Mary or Joseph. This year Matthew will invite us to focus on Joseph.

These Sunday gospels are linchpins for us as we make our way through the season of preparation and preparedness and perseverance that is Advent. And they are in conversation with the other readings each week, and we are in conversation with them. What do you hear in that conversation this morning? What questions are the readings posing for our consideration?

Clearly, the gospel reading from Matthew has an apocalyptic tone about the last things, the ultimate things. It comes from near the end of the Jesus story on earth, not the beginning. Advent begins at the end, not the beginning. It's not an accident. It's entirely on purpose, and it reminds us that for centuries Advent has not been about preparing for the first coming of Christ at Christmas but about the return of Christ at the end of the age. In fact, our English word Advent actually from the

Greek *parousia*, the return of Christ

In our apocalyptic gospel, the disciples are asking about the end of the age, the end of time. And Jesus is basically saying, don't try to predict the end; focus on living in the now.

That is a Jesus word for their time, for our time, and for all time. Focus on living in the now in ways that serve God and neighbor. Past and future constantly come together in the singularity of the present. The present moment. Now. It's all we ever have.

Now—our now, the world's now, the Church's now, our country's now, our community's now, our congregation's now—is a now of disruption and discontinuity.

The world has been much changed by COVID. Changes in US culture and in the life of the Church have been accelerated by the pandemic. The pace of these changes is somewhat dizzying and often bewildering. Many people continue to look in vain for a return to pre-pandemic normalcy, which, truth be told, wasn't really all that normal, was it? But as I have said many times already from this spot, there is no going back. There is only going forward. From this now into God's unfolding future.

Following a Thanksgiving week with multiple mass shootings, it's not hard to think that our now is a worse now than previous ones. But a brief rehearsal of the history of the twentieth century alone, some of which we've covered the past two Sundays, reminds us that the human race has come through some diabolically awful "nows" in previous eras. Our species has survived and also in many ways thrived.

The reading from Isaiah reminds us that the people of God have lived in difficult days of disruption for eons. For why would Isaiah speak of all the nations of the world coming together to God's house in days to come if he were not living in an age in which the nations were very much distanced from one another? And why would the prophet predict a coming future of peace when swords would be hammered into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks unless he was living a time of war?

It seems that Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* was right, *It was **and is** the best of times and the worst of times*; always and everywhere. Multiple things are

true at once.

Jesus also gives the promised first Sunday of Advent wakefulness word. Stay awake because you don't know at what hour Messiah will return. What does this mean?

We know that human beings cannot live without sleep. We know that sleep is foundational to our health and wellbeing. Jesus is not talking about sleep deprivation or post-traumatic symptoms of hyperarousal.

He is talking about a life of active preparedness, of heightened attentiveness.

Preparedness to make our way step by step adjusting to circumstances as they arise. Attentiveness to the sweetness in every single day even in the midst of strife and stress and strain.

Preparedness is not the same as planning. Planning has its place, but plans often go awry. In God's economy, nothing is wasted, and every experience, good, bad, or indifferent, is compost for preparation and preparedness of what is to come.

Attentiveness is not the same as obsessing. Rather, it is actively choosing to what we will give our energy; it is being deliberate about what we focus upon.

Active preparedness and heightened attentiveness/awareness: exactly what we need in this season of Advent, the season of preparing for and remembering the multiple comings of Christ.

The collect of the day and the reading from Romans both mention "the armor of light" without saying exactly what that armor is. *What is the armor of light?*

I suggest to you that the armor of light is not the stuff with which we armor up in defensiveness or unresponsiveness. It's not self-justification or self-delusion. It's not even self-protection much less self-aggrandizement. Rather, this armor is the stuff that lets us live fully into our calling. For though we are not all called to the same thing, we are all called to something.

This armor of light is counter-intuitive: knowledge of it gives us courage to make ourselves vulnerable as Jesus the Christ made himself vulnerable by coming to us and living among us.

The armor of light is the strength of the living Christ made manifest in us. It is all those things that keep us grounded in gratitude and in the goodness of God. It is all those things that help us remember who and whose we are, that allow us to see ourselves and others with compassion. It is all those things that equip us and empower us to bear the light of Christ into the world and to live out our promises as baptized people.

My armor may not look exactly like yours perhaps not even remotely like yours. My calling and yours are not necessarily the same. So, this spiritual armor may look differently on different Christians. And probably should.

Remember when David was preparing to go out to face Goliath? Remember when Saul gave David his own armor to wear into that battle? David put on Saul's armor, but it was way too big for him and way too heavy. He couldn't even move in it. It was Saul's armor, made to fit Saul, not David, not anyone else.

And David's armor was practically no armor at all by comparison; David's armor was the armor of skillful means. He carried only his shepherd's staff, his slingshot, and five smooth stones—tools so familiar to him they were like extensions of his own body. That's what your armor of light should feel like.

So be sure of this: this spiritual armor, the armor of light, is available to all of us, and it fits each of us—not somebody else.

Advent reminds us not only to decorate— isn't this gorgeous, y'all? For the past week, many hearts and hands, many brave souls climbing up on tall ladders, hours and hours of attentive work, paying attention, staying alert so as not to fall, etc. What a metaphor for this season of preparation, preparedness, attention, perseverance. This season calls to us, reminds us not only to decorate but also to suit up in this armor of light, to suit up to engage our work in our armor; not somebody else's work in somebody else's outfit.

And Advent reminds us of these multiple comings of Christ.

Jesus came into human history, to live and die as one of us.

Jesus comes to us all the time, incarnated in people and circumstances we might not immediately recognize as Christ.

And Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And, by the way, that's a promise, not a threat. It is good news, and we proclaim it together in the creed every week. His dominion will have no end.

We live in the meantime, between the first and the last comings of Christ. And as I heard someone say recently, the meantime is often mean times. But here we are.

The question for us is, *Are we willing to put on our armor of light? Are we willing to keep suiting up and showing up in the armor that fits us to do the work that is ours to do, to bear witness to the reality and love of God in Christ, to suit up and show up as people of the Incarnation who wear the armor of light.*