

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT (A)

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the year 375 AD, an early Christian writer proclaimed, *“There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born. Firmly established in his early years and in a few years will achieve supreme power.”*

The 2nd and 3rd century Church Father, Hippolytus, wrote that Christ would return in the year 500 AD.

The time leading up to the close of the first millennium, 1000 AD, was filled with predictions of the return of Jesus. Some were so sure of the Lord’s coming, that they neglected to plant their crops.

In the 16th century, Martin Luther wrote, *“We have reached the time of the white horse of the Apocalypse. This world won’t last any longer.”*

Christopher Columbus was a student of Biblical prophecy. He wrote a volume called “The Book of Prophecies,” and he predicted that the world would end in 1556.

In 1800, William Miller predicted that the return of Jesus would occur in 1844. Half a million Adventists awaited the end, some gathered on hilltops, others gathered in graveyards, planning to ascend with their departed loved ones.

In 1992, Harold Camping predicted the end. When nothing happened, he changed his date to 1993. Then he changed it again to 1994.

In the New Testament, one characteristic of *false* Christian teachers is the presumption to know and preach with authority that “The end is near!” (Lk 21:8). In the book of Acts, when the disciples asked the risen Lord, *“Will you at **this time** restore the kingdom to Israel?”* Jesus answered, *“It is not for **you** to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his **own** authority”* (Acts 1:6-7).

During the Second World War, a group of Christians, believing that Hitler was the Antichrist, asked Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *“Why do you expose yourself to all this danger? Jesus will return any day, and all your work and suffering will be for nothing.”*

Bonhoeffer replied, *“If Jesus returns tomorrow, then tomorrow I will rest from my labor. But today **I have work to do**. I must continue the struggle until it is finished.”* (Daily Bread, Nov. 10, 1991)

Bonhoeffer was right. It is not for us to try to determine the *when* of Christ’s coming. It is rather for us to be *expectant* of that coming, to the end that we might be found doing what our Lord has called us to do. In fact the verses immediately following today’s Gospel make that point exactly. Verses 45 and 46 of chapter 24 of Matthew declare that servants ought to be found serving the master when he returns — at an unknown time.

Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, tells the story of a funeral he attended when he was serving a small congregation in rural Georgia. A relative of one of his members died. And so, out of kindness, Willimon and his wife Patsy, attended the funeral, which was held in an off-brand, country Baptist church. Willimon writes:

*I had never seen anything like it.
The preacher began to preach.
He shouted; he flailed his arms.
“It’s too late for Joe. He’s dead.
But it ain’t too late for you.
People drop dead every day. Why wait?
Now is the day for decision. Give your life to Jesus.”*

Willimon goes on to suggest that this was the *worst* thing he had ever seen. He fumed and fussed at his wife Patsy, complaining that this preacher had done the worst thing possible for a grieving family — he had manipulated them with guilt and shame. His wife Patsy agreed. But then she said: *“Of course the worst part of it all, is that what he said is **true**.”*

Like Willimon, I wouldn’t put it the way that Baptist preacher did. But that preacher had at least one thing exactly right. He was right that *today* is the day. *Now* is the time to prepare. *Now* — *today* is the time to be ready for the coming of Christ.

The question then becomes, “how do we do that?” What do we do in order to be prepared.

The Rev. Richard Neuhaus gets at this question in a recent essay. He writes:
*We are all searching, and ultimately — whether we know it or not — we are searching for God. The fact is that we do not really **know** what we’re looking for or who we’re looking for. Almost a thousand years ago, St. Anselm of Canterbury said, “God is that greater than which cannot be thought.” There is always a thought beyond what we are able to think.*

Neuhaus is making the point that for us human beings, God is, quite literally, *inconceivable*. He is beyond us. And that is why God took it upon himself to be conceived as a human being in the womb of Mary. Because we are not able — even in thought — to rise up to God, God stooped down to us. Since we are unable to reach up to him, he reached down to us in Jesus, who is “Emmanuel” — literally “God with us.”

As you may fuss or struggle with how to be prepared for God, and how to search for God, the good news is that *God is searching for you*. And even better news, *God has found you*. So, the great question becomes not so much whether or not *you* have found God, but rather, whether you have found yourself *being found by God*. After all, *God* is not lost. *He* does not need to be found. You and I, *we* are the ones who get lost. We are the ones who need to be found.

And of course, there are many ways of being lost. In today's Gospel, Jesus declares that as in the days of Noah before the great flood, we were lost in eating and drinking, in marrying and giving in marriage.

One of the surprising facts in this end-time teaching is that the last times will be *normal*. There will be parties, meals, eating and drinking, courtships and weddings, right up to the coming of Christ. The sin of Noah's generation wasn't that they went about these daily activities. It was rather, nonchalance about God. The sin was immersion in the everyday, with no thought for the *last* day. They went about their daily tasks with no recognition of the presence of God.

Even so, we can become lost in living what we tell ourselves is the good life. We want more and more of it, and the more we have, the more we long for what is beyond our reach, beyond the grasp of our possessing. And in our longing and our searching, we can become blind to the gift already given to us: Emmanuel — God right here with us.

St. Paul says, "*It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.*" He is telling you to wake up to the gift God has already given you. This season is Advent, which means "coming." Christ came. Christ comes. Christ will come again. There is no time — past, present, or future — in which Christ is not God with us.

He was with you yesterday. He is with you today. He will be with you tomorrow. So you may give up your frantic searching and let yourself be found by the One who desires to be *with you*, the One who longs to have you *with him* forever.

Johannes Pinsk (1891-1957), a German priest expressed it like this, he wrote:

We think that we must love God first so that he will love us... and yet, in his first letter St. John states...

*"Here is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us." Yes, we must love God **because** he first loves us.*

We cannot come to God unless he first comes to us...

*[And] God **has** come in Jesus Christ; through him he is with us in his grace by faith and the sacraments.*

Today's readings call you to awaken to the truth that *you have been found* by Emmanuel — God with us. You have been found by the One whom the Book of Revelation calls the Alpha and Omega — the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. We might say that Christ is the A and the Z, the beginning and the end. He is the Word of God who called into being everything that is, or ever has been, or ever will be. He is the One in whom past, present, and future are always now.

And that One has found you. He comes to you again today in Word and in Sacrament. In fact, he called you here this morning, because he desires to give himself to you again. He longs to give you faith. He longs to strengthen you to live

as his disciple. He comes again, to live *in you* today.

Come and receive him. And so be prepared for his final coming.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Credits: Richard John Neuhaus, *Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas: God With Us*