

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**First Sunday of Advent • December 1, 2019**

**Isaiah 2:1-5 • Psalm 122 • Romans 13:11-14 • Matthew 24:36-44**

This year, we're going to be spending most of our time in St. Matthew's gospel. To help you understand the gospel as a whole and today's gospel reading in particular, it helps to know a little bit about Matthew's worldview. Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospel writers, writing primarily for an audience of Jewish believers. And that means he often makes reference to things or uses language that seems strange to us.

One of the ways that emerges in his gospel is the way he uses Jewish apocalyptic tropes, which basically just means that he had a two-age view of time. Matthew believed that there is a time over here that is marked by war and violence and injustice and sin and idolatry. This period of time doesn't really have a name, so let's just call it "Life." And there is a time over here that is marked by peace and justice and equity and love. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus talks about that time as the "kingdom of Heaven."

By his life, death, and resurrection Jesus inaugurates the kingdom of Heaven. Early in Matthew's gospel, Jesus announces, "The kingdom of God has come near." He brings it into the world. He ushers in this new age. But, here's the tricky part, it isn't ushered in completely. And it won't be ushered in completely until Jesus returns.

So Matthew's community understands itself as living in between these two ages. It's like they're happening simultaneously. Sometimes they look at the world and think, "This looks like the kingdom of Heaven Jesus talked about." And other times they look at the world and they think, "This looks like Jesus never showed up at all."

Those early Christians believed that whenever Jesus came back, he would finish what he started and usher in the kingdom of Heaven completely. Jesus even says that the new age of God's reign dawn before this generation dies. And for the early church, this way of thinking more or less works. It helps make sense of the world. Yea, there's lots of bad stuff happening in the world. But Jesus is coming back, probably sometime late next week, and then he's going to fix everything.

But what happens? Jesus doesn't come back. A week goes by. A year goes by. Pretty soon a few decades go by. That generation Jesus talked about? They all died. And it poses a huge problem for those early believers. It makes them start to have second thoughts about the whole thing. If Jesus was wrong about that, what else was Jesus wrong about? It makes them embarrassed. It looks like you got stood up by Jesus. They start to think that maybe they aren't living in between these two ages. Maybe this is just it. This is as good as it's going to get. And, most important, they start to think that their actions, their mission, their life together, doesn't matter. It can't actually change anything.

One way people have dealt with that discomfort and uncertainty is prediction. Even in biblical times there was a tradition of people trying to figure out when Jesus was coming back with elaborate formulas. And of course, people still do this today. Periodically, some group will pop up on CNN and say that they found a secret code in a cave in the Middle East, and when you combine it with the prices on the IHOP breakfast menu, it says that the world is going to end next week.

Matthew doesn't have a lot of patience for that kind of prediction. He seems to think it's useless and counterproductive. Instead, Matthew advises us not to predict but to prepare." You, Matthew advises, "must be ready." You do not know the day your Lord is coming, so you should live as if God's new reign is going to break into the world fully at any moment. You should live as if you already live in the kingdom of Heaven.

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If we mock the people who try to predict when Jesus will return, Matthew would offer us a word of caution. Not because they aren't misguided, but because we might not be doing a whole lot better.

Last week, the U.N. released its new report on climate change, which found that the Paris Climate Accord, which the United States is in the process of renegeing on, is actually woefully inadequate.<sup>1</sup> The report outlines some of what we already know. Once in a century floods becoming annual occurrences. More powerful storms. Rising temperatures. And, of course, all the downstream effects. Fewer resources will mean more wars. More wars will mean more migration. More migration will mean more xenophobic populism. Etc. Etc.

One of the dynamics the report highlights in a way that feels startling is how our inability to prepare has compounded the problem over time. Because we have been so slow to act, we would now have to triple our cuts in carbon emissions to meet goals that were set just a few years ago. Commenting on the report, Inger Anderson, the director of the U.N. Environment Program, remarked, "We need to catch up on the years in which we procrastinated." We procrastinated. We thought we could take care of later. We thought we had more time.

It's easy to dunk on the people who make predictions about Jesus' return. *You said that Jesus was coming on May 23 and yet today is May 24. So aren't you a dummy.* But the truth is we procrastinators often look just as ridiculous insisting that we can always have more time. It's the procrastinators who end up causing the most harm.

What both of those responses, prediction and procrastination, have in common is they assume that what we do doesn't matter. Prediction assumes that Jesus will return and fix all the world's problems. Why bother improving something that Jesus is going to fix later? Procrastination assumes that we can take up and drop problems at our own convenience. That we only become responsible for the world's problems when we try to fix them. Neither one of these will cut it.

Jesus says, "Prepare." Which is another way of saying that our actions, our actions as individuals, our actions as a community, our actions as a congregation, matter. They make a difference. When you get involved with the world, you are not wasting your time, you are not taking on some new responsibility, you are living in the light of the kingdom of heaven. Don't predict. Don't procrastinate. Prepare.

So how do we prepare for Jesus' coming? How do we get ready for the manifestation of God in the world? Well, for Matthew, preparing for Jesus' coming is not about doing some special tasks. Preparing is not about making some personal statement of faith that gets you squared up with God. Preparing is not about hustling around so that when Jesus comes back you look like you're doing something productive.

The way we prepare for Jesus' coming is not by announcing "the end is near," but living as if "the beginning is coming." Living as if the beginning of God's reign of mercy and justice and compassion is about to be manifested in the world. Ironically enough, Matthew tells us that the way to prepare for the kingdom of Heaven is to live as if it is already here. To live as if your actions matter. Because they do. They matter your neighbors. They matter to the creation. And they matter to God.

On Christmas Eve, our choir is going to be singing a setting of a poem by Howard Thurman. It's titled, "The Work of Christmas," and it captures beautifully what Jesus tells us in today's gospel reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Brady Dennis, "In Bleak Report, U.N. Says Drastic Action Is Only Way to Avoid Worst Effects Of Climate Change," *Washington Post*, November 26, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2019/11/26/bleak-report-un-says-drastic-action-is-only-way-avoid-worst-impacts-climate-change/>

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When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.

So how do we prepare for God's coming among us? By living as if God's is already here.  
Trusting that even in these in between times, God is already present and at work among us.  
The beginning is coming. And it is coming in and through us. So let the work begin.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor