



Advent 2022

Sunday

November 27

9:00am

11:00am

What

Time

Is It?

November 27, 2022 | First Sunday of Advent
Charlie Berthoud | Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44



I hope you all had a good Thanksgiving, and I hope you survived Black Friday! We've now officially entered the "holiday season" in our culture, a time which can be frenetic and stressful. Yet at the same time, this season gives us an opportunity to connect and reconnect with family and with goodness and decency. Examples abound.

Seven years ago, Wanda Dench sent text messages to her family, about Thanksgiving dinner. But she accidentally included a wrong number, belonging to a 17 year-old named Jamal Hinton.

Hinton asked who the text was from. Dench responded: "Your grandma."

"Grandma? Can I have a picture?" Hinton asked. Dench sent a selfie.

Hinton replied: "You not my grandma," with a laughing emoji, then jokingly asked: "Can I still get a plate tho?"

Dench replied, "Of course you can. That's what [grandmas] do ... feed every one." They've been sharing Thanksgiving and more every year since then.

This season provides us opportunities for goodness, decency, and joy, if we are awake and alert.

Our scripture readings today invite us to be awake and alert.

But for those of us who call ourselves Christians, being good and decent is only part of the story. There is more to see and hear in this season.

Last week was Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday in the church year. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the first week in the new church year. So Happy New Year!

The word “advent” means coming. For the church, Advent is a time for us to look back and celebrate God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus, and it’s a time for us to look ahead to future coming of Jesus again.

Advent lasts for four Sunday, leading up to Christmas.

In Advent, we are watching, waiting, and preparing for the birth of Jesus, the one who came with good news of great joy for all the people, and who called his followers to live in a new way, toward the coming Kingdom or Realm of God.

The early church had high expectations that Jesus would be coming back soon. This is reflected in our scripture readings today. The readings from the lectionary on the first Sunday in Advent are not about a baby in a manger, but instead about future coming of Jesus.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome, encouraging early Christians realizing that time is moving onward, that Jesus might be returning soon. So he called them to be alert and awake, to turn from the ways of sin, and to live with purpose. Listen for God’s word from Romans 13:

“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

If indeed Jesus was coming again to somehow bring God’s kingdom in its fullness, then people wanted to know exactly when, so they could be ready.

But as we hear in the gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Advent, Jesus told them that no one knows when this time will be, so he urged them to live their entire lives in a state of alertness. Listen for God's word from Matthew 24.

““But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

So Jesus say be ready. Jesus says keep awake. But he's not really specific as to what he means.

If I had been there, I might have raised my hand and asked, “Excuse me, Jesus, could you clarify a bit what you mean by being ready and awake?”

Apparently, someone asked that because in Matthew 25, the very next chapter, Jesus focuses on the same themes, with the parable of the ten bridesmaids and the parable of the talents, which both also encourage alert and attentive and purposeful living.

While those two parables in Matthew 25 are intriguing and worthy of our reflection, they aren't very specific about what being ready and awake means.

Fortunately, at the end of Matthew 25, Jesus provides a very concrete example of purposeful living, with the parable of the sheep and goats.

In this account Jesus commends the disciples for their kindness to people who are hurting saying that he is present in those hurting people.

- I was hungry and you gave me something to eat
- I was thirsty and you gave me something drink

- I was a stranger and you welcomed me
- I was in prison and you visited me

The disciples are surprised, and Jesus tells them: Whenever you did these acts of mercy for hurting people you did them for me.

It's as if Jesus has come again, in the face of hurting people. Is this what the second coming of Jesus is all about?

Maybe so.

In the spirit of always learning and being a Reformed church always reforming, it's good for us to keep wrestling with things, like the of the second coming of Jesus.

For too long the church has fixated on the second coming of Jesus. I have a sense that sometime in the future there will be some sort of climax of history and time and space, which will include some sort of return of Jesus and triumph of God.

But as Jesus says, we know nothing about the details of this, so in the meantime (or the "in between time," as Karl Barth calls it), we're called to be awake and alert, for God's call and God's presence in our midst. I think pastor and author Barbara Brown Taylor helps us reframe this idea:

"One of my professors told me once, about how the second coming of Christ was an idea cooked up by some church father with only two fingers. The truth, he said, is that Christ comes again, and again, and again—that God has placed no limit on coming to the world, but is always on the way to us here and now. The only thing we are required to do is to notice—to watch, to keep our eyes peeled." ("Don't Say When," by BBT, in *The Christian Century*, 9/21/04)

Maybe Jesus is with us more than we recognize.

Maybe Jesus is present in Ukrainian refugees, or in the woman asking for money at the intersection, or in the lonely kid in the school cafeteria, or in the relative at Thanksgiving that nobody likes, or in the person on the church prayer list.

And in that same spirit of learning and being Reformed and always reforming, maybe we're being called to think in new ways about sin.

For too long church leaders have had a narrow definition of sin, focusing on individual morality, with things like alcohol and sex as if that's all God cared about.

Yes, we need to be mindful of unhealthy substance abuse and yes we need to have conversations about sexual ethics, but we also have to look at the big picture.



In recent years, the Presbyterian Church USA has helped move the conversation on faithful Christian living forward, with the Matthew 25 initiative.

Covenant has become a Matthew 25 congregation, joining hundreds of other congregations, making a commitment to work on three areas:

- Building congregational vitality
- Dismantling structural racism
- Eradicating systemic poverty

The Matthew 25 initiative is helping our church and many others dig deeper into the sins of racism and poverty, to think about the big picture. Doing charity work is nice, and we do that well. But the problems persist, so it's imperative that we ask questions of justice, of systems and structures.

So we have people asking hard questions in the Racist Anonymous Fellowship. We have people wrestling with hard questions in the Black History for a New Day classes. We continue to support students in Guatemala and homeless people here in Madison, while we ask hard questions about immigration and poverty.



Asking those questions can be dangerous, but it's important.

Brazilian bishop Dom Helder Camara served the church during a brutal military dictatorship, and he famously said:

“When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.”

So thanks to the Matthew 25 initiative, we are not only seeking to revitalize our congregation, but we are also asking hard questions about racism and poverty, as part of our Christian discipleship.

Last week we welcomed new members, and we asked them questions. Today we celebrate baptism, and we ask similar questions.

These questions are challenging as well, meant to help us find our way to faithful living.

The essence of membership and baptismal questions is about turning away from evil, which separates us from the love of God, and turning to Jesus Christ, the one who brings abundant life to the world.

So what time is it?

It's time for random acts of kindness.

It's time to wake up and stop sleepwalking through life.

It's time to turn away from selfishness and foolishness and injustice and to turn to the one who bring hope and light into the world. Amen.

Let us pray:

Thank you God for coming into the world in the person of Jesus. Thank you for calling us to be his people. Give us courage and wisdom to ask questions and faithfully follow, with the hope that your Kingdom will come and your will is done. Amen.