

December 1, 2019
1st Sunday of Advent
Matthew 24:37-44

Jesus said to his disciples: 37 “For as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 In (those) days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark. 39 They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be also at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. 42 Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. 43 Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. 44 So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.”

Background:

The Catholic Church begins a new church year (Year A) with the first Sunday of Advent. Throughout this year the gospel readings will come mostly from Matthew’s gospel. Scripture scholars believe that Matthew’s gospel was composed between 80AD and 85AD, most likely in the province of Syria. The population of the area was a mixture of Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles. The Christian community would have begun as largely Jewish, and gradually transitioned into a gentile-dominated community.

The early Christians were also a community dealing with disappointment and hardship. Jesus’ death and resurrection had taken place almost 50 years earlier. The Romans had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem about 10 years earlier. Of those who had experienced Jesus as he walked among them, healing, telling parables, and breathing new life into their traditional understanding of their relations with Yahweh, many were now dead. Yet the Son of Man had not returned as they anticipated. There were people in the community and likely in their families who taunted them about their faith.

The long delay in Jesus’ return stretched the faith of the Christians who believed that Jesus would return quickly to establish the final realm of God. The Christian community was dealing with real questions and tensions. Matthew shapes his gospel to help the community address these issues.

The opening line of the gospel text for this Sunday finds Jesus addressing the disciples about the future coming of the Son of Man. Within the Jewish tradition, it was believed that there would be a time when all of God’s promises would be fulfilled. That moment was in God’s control; nothing they could do would bring it about or prevent it from happening. The Jews did believe that God would send someone into the world to act in God’s name at the appropriate time. How this would happen was unclear. Different schools of thought developed. Some thought that a descendant of David would establish the reign of God. Others thought that one of the priests would help mold them into a holy people. Still others believed God would act in a more mysterious way; a man would come down to earth from the clouds to inaugurate God’s reign.

In the text, Jesus is exhorting, “... be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.” (Matthew 24:44) People at the time of Noah were unaware of the danger that loomed. Therefore they had no way to prepare, and they continued to live their ordinary lives. Jesus says it will be the same when the Son of Man appears; people will be unaware and fully engaged in normal life. He uses examples of both men and women to illustrate his point. The inclusion of a female example would not be typical, thus it makes the point that Jesus’ exhortation is meant to be all-inclusive. The final example is that of a household where everyone is found asleep when the thief comes. Because everyone will be engaged in their daily rituals when the Son of Man appears, Jesus is exhorting his disciples to maintain a stance of vigilance in their daily life.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are your experiences of having to wait--not just waiting in line or waiting for the semester to come to an end, but the waiting that comes from your deepest desires?
2. Do you know people who had placed their faith in God, but at some point became so disappointed that they have stopped praying or even believing in God?
3. Have you ever been ridiculed for holding fast to your values? How has that experience shaped who you are today?
4. The unfolding of the events of the day forced the Christian community to rethink their expectations of God. Are there events in your life, in the church, and in the world that have caused you to rethink your own understanding and expectations of God?
5. This gospel will be proclaimed all around the world. How connected do you feel to those who live with deep longing for the deliverance that will come with the Son of Man?
6. What would you like to say to God's desire that we as people of the Church be beacons of faith, in our culture and in the world, for those who have lost faith or hope in God?
7. Does your reflection on this text affect how you want to use this time of Advent to prepare for the celebration of Christmas?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for November 27, 2016, the First Sunday of Advent

This is what Isaiah, son of Amos, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
The mountain of the Lord's house shall be the highest mountain and raised above the hills.
All nations shall stream toward it; many peoples shall come and say:
"Come, let us climb the Lord's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths."
For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples.
They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks;
one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.
O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.

I rejoiced because they said to me, "We will go up to the house of the Lord."

Now we have set foot within your gates, O Jerusalem, a city with compact unity.

To it the tribes of the Lord go up, according to the decree for Israel, to give thanks

*to the name of the Lord. In it are set up judgment seats for the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May those who love you prosper!
Because of my brothers and friends I will say, "Peace be within you!"
Because of the house of the Lord, our God, I will pray for your good.*

Brothers and sisters: You know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep.
For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is advanced, the day is at hand.
Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;
let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness,
not in promiscuity and lust, not in rivalry and jealousy.
But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.

Jesus said to his disciples: "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.
In those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking,
marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark.
They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away.
So will it be also at the coming of the Son of Man.
Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left.
Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left.
Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.
Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming,
he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into.
So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."

Excerpts from Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122: 1-9; Romans 13:11-14; and Matthew 24:37-4