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Hudson UMC
Advent 1A - 2025 - Mt 24
30 November 2025

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

Whew!
The Christmas season has begun.
Santa has arrived.

The first official BLACK FRIDAY sales are complete...although many retailers have had weeks of pre-Black Friday sales. I am confident that retailers will continue to offer sales and specials in the coming weeks. Today we begin the final 4-1/2 week stretch leading to Christmas. It feels like we are on the home stretch even though it is 4-1/2 weeks away.

But we know as a church that Christmas is not just a retail extravaganza.
It is a holy day.
It is a day that we mark and celebrate the coming of God among us as Jesus.
The children will have a Christmas program next week at the 10:30 service.
As a church, we are involved in providing food, warm clothing, and gifts to those in need.
We have a variety of ways to be involved in these projects in the coming weeks and I encourage you to be a part of them.
Yes, the Christmas countdown has begun in many ways.

In the church, this is the first Sunday in a new church year. We have moved from Year C where most of the gospel readings are from Luke to Year A where we will hear primarily from Matthew in the coming year.

As you have noticed, we have also begun the season of Advent with the lighting of the first of the Advent candles. Only three more blue candles and then we will light the big white Christ Candle.

So if the Christmas countdown has begun...why these verses about the return of Jesus? We have not yet celebrated the baby Jesus in the Bethlehem manger and we are hearing the call to be ready for him to come again. What is going on here? Why are these the verses that begin our Advent season?

To answer this question, let us begin by exploring what this Matthew text would have meant to its first hearers in the 1st and 2nd centuries.

In the days after Jesus' death and resurrection, most ancient Christians thought Jesus would return, permanently return, very soon... people were expecting him in days, weeks at the most, certainly within the lifetime of at least some of them.

Acts 2 tells how some of the first Christians sold all of their possessions and waited for Christ's return in a community of expectation.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul is reassuring people. It is clear that people have died before Jesus has returned and this has been a struggle to understand. What happens to those we love who have died? How will they get to heaven?

Paul answers,

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord together. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

So...how are we to understand the scriptures which bear witness to the first Christians' conviction that Jesus would soon return? And why is it that we hear this scripture on the First Sunday of Advent, a few weeks before Christmas?

Advent is a time "between the times." On the one hand, Advent reminds us of God's promises to Israel of an Emmanuel – "God with us." At Christmas, God comes as Jesus (fully human-fully divine) to deliver people from sin and to show them how to live. Advent is a strong reminder of God's powerful acts in history.

But Advent is more than just memory.

We know that all is not well with the world...poverty, drive-by shootings, unhappiness, death, illness, refugees, and more abound. Indeed the world is upside-down.

God also knows that all is not right.

Advent reminds us to anticipate the day on which Emmanuel will return...because on that day, death will be no more and all wrongs will be made right and the world put right-side-up.

But we live between the times. We live between the birth of Jesus 2000-years ago and somewhere out in the future, Christ's second coming. We are right in the middle of these times.

Some people I know hear this passage from Matthew and become anxious. They read these passages – that is this and other apocalyptic texts in the Old and New Testaments – and work out a timeline of events that are already underway or soon to transpire. They worry about whether they and those they love will be caught in the rapture; they don't want to be left behind to incur God's wrath. We must get ready, because these things may happen in our lifetime. Get ready to be judged, they say.

But I think this Matthew passage calls us away from historical anxiety. Of course it is full of signs of the end, but it is quite clear...no one knows the day and the time this will happen.

Secondly, I would remind us that we do not know the manner of Jesus' return. When Jesus first came to earth 2000-years ago, most people struggled to believe that he was the Messiah.

He was not wealthy and not royalty and not a great military commander. Jesus shattered the expectations of the day of what the Messiah would do, who the Messiah would be, and how the Messiah would triumph.

I think that if we are honest, we must admit that we do not know either the WHEN or the HOW of the second coming.

Finally, remember that the Christ who judges us is the same Christ who endured judgment for us. God's judgment never overrides God's grace. The readiness we are called to is not shaped by fear, but by the gratitude for the life offered us by Christ.

I repeat, I think Matthew calls us away from anxiety.

Yes, Jesus will come again...some time...some how.

Yes, I believe that somehow there will be a judgment, but I also believe that God's grace somehow supersedes God's judgment.

Yes, there is much I do not know, but I find this to be full of hope and not anxiety-producing.

We are between times. While the Matthew text points to a mysterious time in the future, it also remains firmly put in the ordinary present day. Yes, we are uncertain...but then so are the angels as to the how and when.

Here is the challenge.

I think there is an unspoken assumption that when we have REAL faith we have all the answers; we should be clear. It can be easy to assume that because we are baffled we must be at fault. In other words, it must be my fault that I do not understand...so my faith must be flawed and weak. This leads many of us to feeling guilty...and most of us are good at feeling guilty...I most certainly am.

Let me put your mind at ease.

Being a person of faith does not mean that we have all the answers. I grew up in a family where faith was important. I went to church 2-3-times every week during my youth. After college I spent 3-years at seminary.

If anyone should have all the answers, I should...but I don't. Far from it.

In this Matthew text, we hear that not even the angels know the **how** or the **when**. To which I say WHEW! If angels don't know, than I am (& we are) in good company; I am (we are) not expected to know the **how** or **when**.

While we are not expected to know everything, we are expected to do something. The Jesus of these verses calls us to a life of work in a spirit of wakefulness. In this Matthew text, Jesus has his eye on what is going to come (he DOES believe that something decisive is going to happen in the future). But, BUT, BUT! Jesus keeps our attention firmly focused on the present day and the needs of the hour.

Jesus directs people to the field, the mill, the daily grind. The ordinary places where life is lived. For it is in the mundane that faithfulness is lived.

Biblical faith knows that it does NOT know everything, but that does not mean we know nothing.

We do know enough.

We know enough of the character of God...particularly of God's mercy and God's love.

We also know that we are called to do something today...here...now.

So....what does this Matthew text have to do with the First Sunday of Advent?

As we prepare for Christmas, Matthew reminds us that we live between the times.

We remember and celebrate Jesus' birth 2000-years ago.

We also recall that Christ is with us here...now...today.

We see glimpses of that among ourselves in this community of believers.

And because of God's presence with us today, we live our lives anticipating (celebrating even) that day when we can be in God's presence more fully and more completely.

Actually, I think you know this already.

Remember the third response of our communion liturgy – FWS2257c:

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Hosanna in the highest! Hosanna in the highest! Hosanna in the highest!

Yes, we wait in hope because we wait in memory.

We remember God's mighty acts in history and trust that God will again move in some dramatic, definitive manner in the future.

Today...maybe?

Tomorrow...perhaps?

Hundreds of years from now...could be?

We don't know the time or the place or the manner of Jesus' second coming.

But we wait in hope because we wait in memory.

We don't know much, but we do know that the defining characteristic of God is grace.

It is in this God that we place our trust.

We also know what we are to do while we wait.

We are not called to unravel the time and place and manner of Jesus' second coming...

Until he comes, we are called to live like Jesus.

Until he comes, we are called to be lights among the darkness about us.

Until he comes, we are called to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and cloth those who need clothing.

Christ will come again.

Hope is coming.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

