

Year A, Advent 1
November 27th, 2016
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Matthew 24:36-44

Build Your Ark!

On Advent One we always start by preparing for his coming again, his second coming, not his first. The text begins, "Nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows." This Father is all powerful, like Caesar in Rome, only just the opposite.

What kind of Father is he? What will it be like just before his Son returns to our earth? Here are some clues. The time of his coming will be just like the time of Noah. It will be ordinary time when the Human One comes. People will be doing what people do....eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.

At another level it will be a time of mimetic crisis, of polarization and strong and differing positions throughout culture. After all, that was what the flood was really. It wasn't water, it was violence and it was spreading everywhere. The archaic deep was welling up and no one knew quite what to do.

This violence entered a critical phase when Noah entered the ark. He and the animals would be riding above the violence in a boat God told him to construct. Is violence rising in our world and does God want us to construct a boat? What would this boat look like?

In the times of Noah violence came down in buckets and the people all got caught up in it and it swept them away. But not Noah! He was in a boat. It was the boat God told him to build and he listened. He had a safe place.

I've been working on my boat, hopefully constructing it according to God's specifications as revealed in scripture. It is a theological/anthropological boat that allows me to see the violence around us. I am hoping this boat will protect me from getting swept away by the flood of violence; by finger pointing on all sides. If we don't see the dangers of finger pointing by both the political left and the right, and everywhere in between, how can we protect ourselves against it? We, too, can get swept up in it.

The people of Noah's time "didn't know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away." They waited too long. They needed to build their ark in advance of the flood. This is what I am hoping we can do together.

The text continues. "At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left." We have always assumed that meant one will go up to heaven while the other remains on earth and has to go through a great ordeal. It's much better, we thought, to be taken and be out of the mess. But what if we have been reading it wrong? What if the one who gets taken from the field is an illegal alien and he gets taken to jail or he is an outspoken opponent of the regime in power or maybe he represents the regime in power and gets

kidnaped for ransom. Or maybe we are talking about terrorism where people are randomly taken so that the population will be afraid and easier to control?

Maybe these are indicators of rising tides of world violence. This is an interpretation that moves what Jesus is saying from spiritual realms, ethereal and other-worldly, to events in human history; events that regularly happen on this earth.

“Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left.” Why did the one get taken and who took her? We thought we knew but do we really? What made the one left different from the one taken? In view of these disturbing disappearances Jesus says, “Stay alert.” Be aware of the times and what is going on around you. Build an ark; open yourself to a way of seeing that enables you to float on the rising flood of violence.

“You don’t know what day the Lord is coming.” What does that even mean? What is the day of the Lord’s Coming? We have assumed it was an awful day for a majority of the world’s people. All the bad people will get found out and destroyed. We think it will be a day of vengeance and retribution. But what if we got that wrong too? What if it were the upside-down of that? What if the day of the Lord’s coming turned out to be a day when compassion, love and mercy were suddenly revealed as the real force in history. What if we discovered that all the violence, horror and suffering we had visited on each other were all in vain, unnecessary and made our world into hell? What if in our exhaustion and despair we suddenly see violence itself as the problem? Would that be a kind of Second Coming of Christ?

It didn’t matter if it were state-sponsored violence or private violence; it was all wrong-headed. Wouldn’t that be a judgment on all people through the revelation of grace and forgiveness? God’s judgment is God’s grace and it’s for all people. Could that revelation be the coming of the Human One?

“Therefore, stay alert!” Be ready and open to seeing him in any form in which he appears. He wants to give us a boat that can lift us above the turbulent and chaotic flood of violence. Build your boats now in preparation.

Our lection ends with a strange image. Let me read it again so that you can feel its strangeness. “But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn’t allow the thief to break into his house.” This enigmatic passage raises several questions for me. Who is the head of the household that gets broken into? Why can’t he predict when the thief will come? The thief seems to be the coming Human One, how can this be? What is the coming Human One going to steal when he breaks into this house?

What if he broke in and stole violence, the pointing of the finger, our commitment to accusing and defending. What will we do without pointing the finger, how will we manage, how will we keep empire; whether on a nation to nation level, or in our little fiefdoms at churches and in our homes? If father doesn’t know best, who does?

And truth is the Human One has already broken into the house of human habitation and the “head of the house”, the principalities and powers, that have always run it, didn’t see him coming. It occurred at the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and it has already happened.

As Jesus spoke these words recorded in Matthew 24 the thief was about to break into the house. The crucifixion was about to commence. Jesus was telling them they were asleep and being broken into at that very moment. Had they been alert they wouldn’t be proceeding with their plans to crucify him. The crucifixion and resurrection allowed the Human One as thief to break in and steal their thunder. He took what was hidden and revealed it. He exposed how they used finger-pointing to divide and conquer, maintain and exploit, diminish and dismiss, all the while engendering fear and killing hope.

And just as they couldn’t see how Jesus and his cross were active in their world, so our generation doesn’t see how he is active in ours. Jesus’ second coming, in whatever form, comes to us out of the blue and surprises us with its grace, compassion and benevolence.

“Therefore you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don’t know.” But we have an advantage. We know that he is coming and that he has already broken into the house of human bondage. We know that Jesus, the thief who comes in the night, has stolen the sacredness of violence and revealed it for the sham it is. We know there is no good violence, only violence and Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection has undone it. Knowing this, we build our ark while there is still time. You see, the ark is a symbol for a new way of seeing that allows us to float on the waters of chaos and violence without being submerged and swept away.

Charles Wesley’s hymn “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” carries the same idea only Wesley sees Jesus himself as the ark. Verse one reads:

Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly, while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high. Hide me, o my Savior, hide, till the storm of life is past; safe into the haven guide; O receive my soul at last.

On this first Sunday of Advent, in the name of our Lord who is coming soon, the Human One, I urge you to build your ark. Amen.