

“Moving from the Land of Regret”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

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First Advent

Just as at Thanksgiving we may pull out those boxes labeled, “Christmas decorations,” on the first Sunday in Advent, we are tempted to open the box labeled, “Jesus’ birth.” Within it are prophet anticipations, angel visitations, a joyous mother-to-be, and a very a surprised father-to-be. Yet, that box must wait a week to be opened, because the first Sunday of Advent has us leaping past the anticipated coming of Messiah, past the birth of Jesus, through his life and ministry, to Jesus’ own words about final judgment and what is commonly called his second coming.

Matthew’s Gospel has a clear theme there will be a final reckoning, a judgment. As such, I will admit our lesson is not what I would call my “go to” Scripture. My wariness about judgment texts is not about God’s decisions regarding good and evil, but how such Scriptures have been manipulated by the Church and individuals to create private courtrooms of holy judgment.

In Matthew 24, Jesus will remind his listeners of the futility of humans trying to figure out the time or place of a final reckoning. Then he will tell of a curious mystery of two pairs of people, in which one of the two is taken up and the other left behind. Yet, if you came this morning to learn why one man in the field or one woman at the grinding wheel was taken and the other left, I will not be solving that riddle. Yet, within it is the theme of readiness.

Our Gospel lesson recalls the days of Noah. Jesus’ focus is on the lack of readiness of those who were victims of the flood, those who were going about their daily routines, doing their tasks, eating and drinking, and looking to the future, with marriages and anticipated new generations. No statement is made about Noah’s righteousness, nor about good versus evil. We will simply hear a call to be ready. Let us listen for Jesus’ end times words about “readiness” in Matthew 24:36-44.

³⁶*“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

It has been over twenty-four years since the younger of our sons played his final high school basketball game. It was senior night, and Jeff was introduced along with Lynn and me in the pregame ceremony. Nothing was on the line in terms of any playoff possibilities, so there was no built-in intensity for the game. Early in the second half, Jeff was called for a foul, his fourth. He reacted, in anger at himself; however, the referee took Jeff's response to be directed at him, so he called a technical foul, our son's fifth, which put him out of the game – again, it was senior night, and this was his final game as a high schooler.

Long story short, Jeff went to the bench more in tears than anger. I went ballistic. I screamed at that ref, actually moving down closer to the court, and kept at it until, he finally responded. Then, I took a self-imposed "time out" in the school hallway.

I can assure you that incident is not in my scrapbook of "proudest moments"; in fact, it was an action I regretted for months to follow as I would replay it in my mind. Not only that, but a year following this, I began my work as an interim pastor, with an eery feeling that referee might be sitting in the pew of a church I served.

If you have ever embarrassed yourself like that – even if you were fully justified, as, of course, I was – you may find yourself reliving the moment. You may also notice yourself residing in the what I call the land of regret. Fortunately for me, over the years, the replays diminished, and while the incident is still a part of my memory, it is pretty much only recalled as a story for a speech or sermon.

Another regrettable time I had was just before my parents had to leave their home. My mother, who had lost the capacity to reason, was searching for ways to stay in their house, while at the same time agreeing it was dangerous for she and my Dad to do so. There were times I simply became angry with her, knowing full well I could win the argument, but also realizing it would mean nothing. She was at the point where it would usually be forgotten within minutes, but what might be the lingering scars?

My guess is most of us have moments of regret for things we have done or said, even if justified. The ones that stay with us longest are those where scars were left we were unable to heal, or hurts were caused that could no longer be reconciled.

As for the basketball referee, if he was a member of one of the churches in Pennsylvania I served as an interim, he never identified himself. That one simply faded away, though it taught me to be saner when our daughter played sports several years later.

I also reconciled the regrettable arguments with my mother, recognizing my own weariness and fear and confusion about making decisions for those who had always been well able to make them themselves. At the time, it was also a signal my caregiving ability was reaching its limits.

I thought about regret as I read our Gospel lesson on readiness. I thought of those in Noah's time who might have acted differently, "if only they had known" of the flood. Of course the flood, and Matthew's images of rapture, are pretty final, but how many times do we ponder "if only..."? "If only I had known, I would have said something different, or done something more, or spent less time doing one thing and more another." "If only I had waited or paused, I might not have spoken so quickly or acted so hastily." Such "if only..." replays can lead us to the land of regret.

My thought this morning is it is hard to grow in faith, or share hope, if we allow ourselves to settle down and reside in the land of regret. Regret can be overwhelming, whether for past mistakes, or simply dumb choices we made; for an opportunity not taken, or a word of love we did not share; for warnings we ignored, or simply did not hear. Regret is not where we want to dwell, but regret can weigh us down so much we can feel unable to move out of its neighborhood. It does not help the land of regret often borders the village of guilt.

When regret takes up residence, it is hard to make ourselves ready for something new, including Jesus' call to be ready for the arrival of the Son of God. That said, I am not one who regularly monitors my readiness for a judgment day. So, for me, our Gospel lesson neither creates a fear of being left behind, nor instructions to ensure we are among the rapturously taken up. So, readiness for what?

I think our readiness, our Advent readiness, may include examining any ways we are residing in the land of regret, living under any disabling pall of despair for the past. Our Advent readiness also alerts us to envision moving from the land of regret of the past to a place where we can be transformed for the future. Our personal and faith memories help us make the move.

As we begin Advent, while we may wait to open the box labeled "Jesus' birth", we do not pretend the Christ child was never born; indeed, it is our memory of Emmanuel, our experiences of God with us, we bring with us to each Advent season. As one biblical scholar suggests, "We wait in hope because we wait in memory." [Bartlett, David, in Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 1, Bartlett and Taylor, editors, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010), p. 24.]

"We wait in hope because we wait in memory." Looking back on what God has done gives us confidence in what God desires to do, and what God can do with us, and with our hopes and dreams, and yes, even what God can do with our lingering regrets.

Advent invites us to be ready for God events, to be alert to glimmers of God's light and peace, even as we go about our daily living in fields and homes, at work and play, grinding meal or grinding coffee. We become conscious to notice God's intrusions into life and the world, "even if the rest of society is not." [Carter, Warren, Matthew and the Margins, (Orbis Books, New York, 2000), p. 480.]

I can imagine some future judgment, but not with St. Peter holding God's list of our individual sins, including why I went ballistic at a referee. I think God knows we wrestle with and seek to reconcile such regrettable actions. What I think God may ask in a judgment scene is: "What did you do about my clear vision of peace and reconciliation? What did you do to feed and clothe, to advocate for and stand with the poor and oppressed? What did you do to leave my creation a better, greener place for future generations? Those very questions can be motivations to move from the land of regret and take up residence in a place of hope.

Advent involves first recognizing those without hope resort to swords and spears for their security, and then committing ourselves to create ploughshares of hope out of swords of despair, and pruning hooks of care out of spears of destruction. In God's reign, "implements of conflict will be transformed into tools of community." [Birch, Bruce, in Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 1, op. cit., p. 5.]

Advent reminds us to live expectantly in the “between times,” between an old age passing and a new one arriving. Advent is about leaving lands of regret and, in the words of Isaiah, going to God’s mountain to be taught God’s ways so we can walk God’s paths, not in some future heaven, but the here and now of our earthly life, and be ready for the one still to come.