Here’s a riddle that’s been making its way around social media recently. See how you do:: “It’s 3:00 a.m. when the silence of your house is broken by the sound of your doorbell. Unexpected visitors! And they’ve showed up for an early breakfast. You have strawberry jam, honey, wine, bread and cheese. What is the first thing you open?” … I’ll give you just a moment to think about it. How many of you came up with the refrigerator being the first thing you open? Oh, not many – good, you are clever. … How many of you say you’d open the front door first, to see who it is in the first place? OK, not bad… Finally, how many of you said that, of course, the first thing you’d open would be your eyes – because at 3:00 a.m. in a silent house, you’d be sleeping?? +++ Good job – a lot of you got it right (although I think I saw a few hands go up more than once.) +++ +++ There are a lot of things you can do to serve guests, isn’t there, especially if you know when they are coming? But one thing I notice in this riddle is that you weren’t really prepared for the unexpected breakfast guests – they showed up when you least expected it. I mean, strawberry jam, honey, bread, and cheese are pretty good – but wine? For breakfast? No bacon – no eggs – no milk… no coffee??… I’m sure part of the conversation over this impromptu breakfast included the host saying, “I’d have had a better breakfast for you if I had known when you were coming so I could prepare.” +++ But even before that – before doing the things you have to do to get ready – before scourging around and pulling out the cheese and the jam – the first thing you have to do is open your eyes. You have to wake up, and realize someone’s ringing the bell.

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You don’t have to be a regular around here to see that something different is happening today. The first thing you noticed are our beautiful decorations – the tree, the candles on the end of each pew, the giant wreaths. And then, to start the service, the Lys family lit our first Advent candle, and reminded us of God’s promise through the prophet Jeremiah: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord… In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”… Jeremiah’s prophecy is just the first promise we heard today that something new is going to happen – someone is coming who will change everything… Isaiah adds his voice in our scripture reading:: “Out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” +++ +++ Someone is coming to change the world – to bring peace – to bring justice – but they don’t tell us just when it will happen… At the risk of stretching our opening metaphor to the breaking point, Jeremiah and Isaiah give fair notice that one morning at 3:00 a.m. your doorbell will ring. You will be called to serve breakfast – so maybe, just maybe, you should keep some bacon, and some eggs and milk – and definitely some coffee – around, all the time – so you’ll be ready.

But let’s keep looking for things that are different today – look a bit deeper. One thing you notice is we have new colors – the paraments and my stole are blue for Advent – so it’s a new season. What you might not know is that the first week of Advent is also the beginning of the new liturgical year – or in terms of the three-year lectionary cycle, today is the first Sunday in Year A – the year of Matthew. We just finished Year C – when we focused on Luke. +++ +++ It seems like an interesting time to start the new cycle, doesn’t it? At Advent? Why not at the big-ticket observances – like Easter – starting the new year after the resurrection of Christ? Or Pentecost – starting the new year with the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church? Or Christmas itself – with the birth of Jesus? +++ +++ But we don’t begin anew on any of those days – with their particular – often dramatic if not fully understood moments. +++ +++ Our yearlong cycle includes the birth, baptism, and ministry of Jesus Christ. It includes Lent, when we remember that we are dust, and turn to God in repentance. And the Passion of Christ – his crucifixion – resurrection – and ascension. The year includes the Great Commission – it includes Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes to us like tongues of fire. And it includes the Reign of Christ, culminating in the glory of Christ the King Sunday. +++ And all of that begins today… – with a call out of the darkness, to wake up – to prepare ourselves – for what God is about to do…+++ It’s personal…+++ And it’s urgent. +++ Sleepers, Awake! +++ Christ warns, don’t get lulled in like the people of Noah’s time, eating and drinking without a care in the world until the day Noah entered the ark and the flood swept them all away. +++ Our year begins with a
And, all of this isn’t just about Christmas – through this Advent season we aren’t just waiting and preparing for the child to be born in Bethlehem. We are also preparing for Christ’s return: we prepare for the Son of God to break into our history, our lives, and our time – while remembering and celebrating when it happened the first time. +++ Jesus Christ – God’s New Covenant with us – is not just a “one and done.” +++ Our reading, when Jesus talks about the coming of the Son of Man, comes from the final chapters of Matthew – just days before his arrest. He’s not talking about Bethlehem. Jesus is looking into the future – beyond his own crucifixion – beyond his resurrection. +++ He looks to a moment that still lies before us… which Paul reflects in his urgent letter to the Romans: “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.” Stay awake. Lay aside the darkness of this world, Paul tells us – lay aside quarreling and jealousy, drunkenness and debauchery. “Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Be awake. Be ready.

It’s interesting and maybe a bit unsettling when you really look at the contrasts we have before us today. Advent is wrapped up in Christmas in so many ways – remembering the birth of our Lord as we prepare for him to come again. So, the pink and purple candles of our Advent wreath are comfortably sitting next to the Christmas tree with its warm glow. The candles are in the windows – timed to come on each evening and twinkle for each passerby. We have visions of the manger, and angels, and shepherds. +++ At the same time, though, Christ refers to his own arrival like a thief that will break and enter your house when your guard is down, and carrying away your valuables. Christ as a disrupter. And, he invokes the image of unprepared people swept away by a flood, people disappearing from fields and from their places of work. +++ Is this the same Jesus of Christmas. Is it the same Jesus as the tame babe in swaddling clothes on a Silent Night? Is it the Jesus who fed multitudes – who healed the sick – rescued the oppressed – and died on a cross? +++ Now, a thief in the night?? – It is a bit unsettling, isn’t it? +++ +++ I think Jesus is reminding us that we can’t pin him down with our own sense of familiarity. He was never interested in being what people expected him to be – filling roles they wanted him to play. +++ In the same way, he’s not interested in fitting into our business-as-usual lives, where following him is one of many priorities which, depending on the week, might get pushed to the back burner. He sees us walking in our sleep as we generously try to make room for him in our once-a-week routine… Like the disciples at Gethsemane, Christ sees us nod off instead of personally engaging with him in prayer… He listens to us argue the politics of poverty and immigration while his children sleep in the streets and dangerous tent cities line the border… He watches us surrender to the “complexities” of environmental policy while his creation thirsts,… and burns,… and melts. +++ +++ We have lulled ourselves to sleep. +++ +++ And, as the thief in the night,… Jesus reminds us… that he is the Christ who took a whip to the money changers – he is the Christ who argued the Pharisees into submission with just a few words. Jesus is the Christ who breaks what needs to be broken, and repairs what needs to be repaired… He will not be tamed… he will not be domesticated… And he pursues us. +++ +++ And isn’t that exactly the savior we need? A God who is unpredictable…who breaks into our history in ways we could never expect – at times when we least expect. ++++++ In a sermon called, "The Face in the Sky," Frederick Buechner describes the Incarnation as nothing less than shocking when we look at it with fresh eyes – it forces us to wonder at the God’s breathtaking unpredictability: "Those who believe in God," writes Buechner, “can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in the stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind.+++ If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this... least... auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant’s child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too."
Christ is coming – Jeremiah promised it. Isaiah promised it in today’s reading – along with Micah, Zechariah, Malachi and other Hebrew Prophets. John the Baptist promised it. +++ Christ is coming – and not just to the ancient people around Bethlehem… Christ is coming NOW – to us. Jesus and Paul both promised it in today’s scripture readings. And John the evangelist promised it in his Revelation, decades after Christ’s death and resurrection. God is coming – when you least expect it. +++ In a second great historical event, yes… but before that – NOW – God breaks into our lives and our world as well. +++ +++ Christ is always coming… Always arriving… Always here. +++ +++ Ready to turn our world upside down… Ready to teach us to beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. +++ Sleepers, Awake! +++ “You know what time it is, how it is the moment for you to wake from sleep… Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” +++ +++ My friends – as you prepare for the arrival of Christ – amid the busyness of the season:: shopping, wrapping, decorating, cooking, (and eating) – let the first thing you do be to open our eyes - NOW… wake up before the doorbell rings, and remain – always – ready to receive your King.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.