

November 30, 2025—The First Sunday of Advent
The Rev. James Wyatt

You Must Be Ready

Last Sunday, a whole bunch of parents met in the library and talked together about Godly Play, the approach we use for the spiritual development of our children. One of the things I loved about that meeting was Paul Steinke explaining how part of the Godly Play philosophy is to always answer questions by saying, “I wonder.” I love that because it strikes me as very Episcopalian to live in the questions instead of rushing to an easy answer. Because I hope you realize that when I stand up here every week, I’m not here to give The Answer. Whatever I say here isn’t the only possible answer. And it’s part of our task as followers of Jesus to keep asking questions, to keep wrestling with them, like Jacob wrestling with God, until we find some way to extract a blessing from them. I hope that being grown-ups doesn’t mean we ever stop wondering. So it’s true that, more than we do in Godly Play, I’ll tell you what I think about things, and I’ll point you to elements of the Christian tradition that I think are cool or important. But mostly what I’m doing here is wondering with you, and that’s especially true this week. Because I have some big wonderings about our reading from the Gospel According to Matthew this morning.

So first of all I wonder about the context of this passage. What is “that day and hour” that Jesus refers back to at the start of this passage? What exactly is he talking about?

One good answer to that question can be found by looking back at the beginning of chapter 24 in the Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 24 starts with the story of the beautiful temple, which we heard from Luke a couple of weeks ago, when Jesus reminded us that the egotistical works of would-be tyrants like King Herod will not last. In Matthew, he goes on to talk about a time of great suffering, like the birth-pangs of a woman in labor, as if all creation were groaning with pain while something new is about to be born. And then he talks about how “all the tribes of the earth... will see ‘the Son of Man [or the Human One] coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” So that’s “the coming of the Son of Man” or the Human One that Jesus is talking about in our reading this morning, that’s the “day and hour” he’s referring back to. And that’s what we’re talking about when we say, in the Nicene Creed, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

So then one of my big wonderings is what that looks like from the perspective of a God who is eternal—a God who is not bound by time and space as we are. We talk about the coming of the Human One or the second coming of Christ as a future thing—“he *will* come again in glory”—but maybe the reality is that it’s an *eternal* thing—a thing that was and is and is to come beyond the reach of time, and that breaks into our time and space in ways that are impossible to understand or predict.

I also wonder whether our imagination is too small about what that second coming might be like. I wonder whether we properly learned the lesson of Jesus’ first coming, where he was born as a poor baby and wandered around without a home and entered Jerusalem on a donkey and died on a cross, rather than behaving like a king is supposed to behave. I think sometimes we imagine that he’ll do it “right” when he comes again—he’ll come again *in glory* and he’ll be the king we always thought he should be, and that makes me question if maybe we’ve missed the whole point.

I also find myself wondering about Jesus’ final words in our passage this morning: “You also must be ready, for the [Human One] is coming at an unexpected hour.” I have to confess, I find these words a little frustrating. It’s like saying, “Expect the unexpected.” By definition, you can’t. If you expect it, it’s not unexpected any more. I mean, Jesus just got done telling us “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.” It sounds like he’s saying

it's impossible to be prepared, since we can't know the day or the hour, and then he turns around and says, "You also must be ready." How are we supposed to be ready?!

So that's a lot of wondering, and not a lot of answers. Jesus doesn't give easy answers, of course, but he does give us a series of parables in the rest of chapter 24 and on into chapter 25 as he expands on this idea of the coming of the Human One. And the best thing we can do with parables is to wonder about them, to turn on our imagination and sit with them for a while, or wrestle with them, and see what they reveal to us.

Now, each of these parables deserves a sermon in itself, and we will hear most of them next November, when we've almost finished making our way through the Gospel of Matthew from the beginning. But I actually think these parables shed a lot of light on what it means to be ready for the Human One's coming, and what it means to prepare ourselves in this season of Advent for Christ's imminent arrival. So let's look at them just very briefly.

So first there's a parable of a slave who's left in charge of the master's household while the master goes on a journey. Will the slave be faithful and take care of feeding the other slaves at the proper time each day? Or will the slave be unfaithful and become like a cruel master who beats the other slaves and hangs out with drunkards? And what will happen when the master does, at last, return? It's easy to read this parable as an exhortation to just be busy, or at least look busy since the boss could pop in at any minute. But the faithful slave in this parable is busy about the work of taking care of his fellow slaves. So we should be taking care of each other—that's the work Jesus wants to find us busy with when he comes again.

Next there's a parable of ten bridesmaids. Five of them were wise—they brought extra oil for their lamps while they were waiting for the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish—their lamps ran out of oil and they missed out on the wedding banquet when the bridegroom finally appeared. I think the wise bridesmaids remind us that we're in this for the long haul, and it's important to keep stocked up on the resources that will help us make it to the end. So we should make sure we've got oil for our lamps, fuel to keep our fires burning, a solid foundation of spiritual practice and a life of prayer to help us see and recognize the bridegroom, Jesus, when he makes his appearance.

Then there's the parable of the talents, where a man going on a journey gives three slaves charge of his property. Then when he comes back, he rewards the ones who were willing to take risks and give back more than they were given, and he punishes the one who returns only the one talent he received. I think the good and faithful servants in this parable demonstrate that the gifts God gives us—meaning both financial resources and "talents" as we typically use the word, the things we can do well—all those gifts are meant to be used, not buried away to keep them safe. So let me gently remind you that if you haven't turned in your estimate of giving, which includes a space to offer your talents to the ministry of the church, it's not too late. You can put it in the offering plate or give it to me or to Louise or mail it to the church, whatever works for you. And that's all I'll say about that today.

Finally, there's the parable of the sheep and the goats, where the Human One gathers all the nations and divides them, like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, according to whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked poor, took care of the sick, and visited the imprisoned. He says the way they treated the very least among them was the way they treated the Human One himself. And you know, I wonder if that parable doesn't answer all our questions right there in itself. It tells us, plain as day, that the Human One is coming to us every day—as those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, as strangers, as the naked, as the sick and the imprisoned. The Human One is right there.

The second coming is happening all around us, all the time.

Not as a triumphant king riding into Jerusalem on a warhorse or flying on the clouds at the head of a legion of angels, but the Human One is coming as the very least among us. And what we need to do to be ready is to take care of them: to feed them, give them something to drink, welcome them, clothe them, visit them, and tend to their illness.

The Human One comes in the midst of the very ordinary, in the midst of our eating and drinking, our marrying and giving in marriage, in the midst of our working in the field or grinding

grain. The Human One comes in the person of our neighbors in need looking for us to help. The Human One comes as a mysterious presence in the ordinary bread we break here and the ordinary wine we share together. The Human One comes, reaching into time from the eternity beyond all time, breaking into our existence in ways that are impossible to understand or predict.

“You also must be ready,” and may we always expect the unexpected, and be prepared for a coming that will always surprise us. “You also must be ready,” so may we be busy about the work of taking care of each other and stocked up with spiritual fuel to keep our lamps burning and our eyes watching for his coming. “You also must be ready,” so may we keep our hearts soft and our arms open and our spirits ready to receive him.

Amen.