

The Quiet Work of Readiness

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As some of you might know, both Bob and I enjoy the Great Courses, which is an online program of college-style lectures taught by professors from around the country.

We're weird, I know. Some couples unwind with cozy mysteries or British baking shows; we relax by listening to lectures on *The History of the Ottoman Empire* or *Early Modern Philosophy*.

Recently Bob did a course on the Philosophy of Evil, which he found so interesting that he kept insisting I check it out. So I went looking for it on the Great Courses website—really, I did, even though it sounded even heavier than most of the courses there—but then I wandered off-course and ended up clicking on a class about the Book of Revelation instead. Because apparently Revelation is cross-referenced with evil in the index.

Revelation wasn't a lot cheerier than a course on evil, but I thought it would be a little more hopeful, at least.

I started listening, and soon I was hooked. I've long been intrigued by the last book in the Bible, but I didn't know much about it. I wanted to learn why a book so odd was included in the Bible in the first place, and why it's been so influential through the centuries.

I'll spare you the details—maybe in another sermon I'll get into them. But what struck me the most about the course is that Revelation isn't a coded timetable for the end of the world—despite what certain corners of the Christian world might insist. It's really a piece of resistance literature, written for a weary, persecuted community longing for reassurance. It's a great cosmic drama that keeps circling back to this truth: God holds the world in his care, even when the world looks like it's spinning wildly off its axis.

And maybe that's why I kept listening. Because these days I think we all need to remember that beneath all the noise and chaos, a deeper story is unfolding. A story, ultimately, of love and hope.

Which brings me to today's Gospel.

This morning we don't get dragons or cosmic battles, like we do in Revelation. Instead, we hear Jesus speaking about the end of things in a different way—and in some ways, his words are even more unsettling. "About that day and hour no one knows," he says. Not the angels. Not even the Son. Only the Father.

Compared to the book of Revelation's fireworks, his message is almost understated. But the effect is the same: it shakes us awake.

Jesus isn't offering a timeline or a prediction. He's offering a posture. And that posture is wakefulness.

He uses images from everyday life—people working in a field, women grinding grain, an owner who doesn't know when the thief will break in. Life is going on as usual, until suddenly, it isn't.

This sounds ominous. But Jesus isn't trying to frighten us into faith. He's trying to invite us into attention.

Advent always begins here—on this unsettling note. Before we cradle the Christ Child, before we meet angels and shepherds and Wise Men, we are asked to consider the end of all things. We're asked to stand at the threshold between what is passing away and what is being born.

But it's not meant to make us anxious. It's meant to bring us clarity.

One thing the Great Courses lectures I listened to emphasized again and again was that apocalyptic literature—whether Revelation or Jesus' words from the Gospel today—is not actually about destruction. It's about unveiling. The Greek word *apokalypsis* means “to reveal,” like drawing back a curtain.

In other words, the end times aren't primarily about endings. They're about God revealing what has been true all along.

And that's how today's Gospel has an almost tender undertone—because Jesus frames all this not with terror, but with the image of God as a householder coming home. Not an intruder, but someone returning for what is his, someone who longs to be reunited with those inside.

The message is not “Be afraid.” It's “Be awake, so you don't miss the One who loves you.”

All of this goes against the spirit of this age, or any age. We live in a culture that is always hungry for predictions. We want to know what's going to happen next. Perhaps that's one more reason Revelation has captured so much attention—humans love a timeline. We want certainty, schedules, warning bells, a heads-up. We want to know what's coming so we can brace ourselves.

But Jesus resists this entirely.

“No one knows,” he says, which is profoundly annoying to our timeline-loving brains.

What we receive instead is an invitation to readiness—not frantic preparedness, not stockpiling spiritual canned goods, but a readiness shaped by love, by attention, by presence.

In this passage Jesus brings up Noah—a story that has been interpreted in all sorts of dramatic ways. But notice what he highlights: not the wickedness of the people, not the details of the ark, but the ordinariness of life.

They were eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage. Life moving forward as life does.

The problem wasn't that people were living ordinary lives. The problem is that they were living ordinary lives **without awareness**, without any sense that God might be near, that change could come.

I don't think Jesus is telling us to abandon the ordinary. Instead he's inviting us to inhabit the ordinary more deeply. To see life not as a blur of days, but as a field where God is sowing seeds.

If today's Gospel feels like a splash of cold water, then, maybe it's because we need it. Numbness is one of the great challenges of modern life. We scroll. We rush. We operate on autopilot. We drift through time without really noticing it.

But Advent calls us back to our senses. "Keep awake," Jesus says—not with anxiety, but with wonder. Not because catastrophe looms, but because Christ is coming.

The author Annie Dillard once wrote a lovely passage that I think reflects this message: "We are here to witness the creation . . . We are here to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but, especially, we notice the beautiful faces and complex natures of each other. . . We witness our generation and our times. We watch the weather. Otherwise, creation would [simply] be playing to an empty house."

I love that last line. I think Advent can be thought of as Jesus' way of making sure the theater patrons are paying attention, that creation isn't playing to an empty house.

So this season invites us to pay attention—to the flicker of a candle, the taste of bread, the breath in our lungs, the faces around us. To let the world be what it truly is: shimmering with God.

It invites us to live *as if something holy is about to happen*—because it is.

And as I ponder today's Gospel, I'm struck by this phrase especially: "For the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." We often hear a warning in this, but I wonder if it's meant to sound like a promise instead—because God has always had a flair for showing up where no one thought to look.

A young girl in an out-of-the-way village.

A birth in a stable.

The Infinite wrapped in the ordinary.

Nothing about the story unfolds according to human expectations.

You could say God enjoys entering the scene from the wings.

And Advent turns that question back toward us:

What are we really waiting for?

What do you long to see born?

Where in your life are you aching for God to slip in quietly and do something new?

Where have you gone numb, distracted, or weary—and where do you know you need awakening?

Because Advent isn't only about a far-off return. It's about the nearness of God right now, in this very moment. It's about letting gratitude find us and letting silence carve out some room inside of us.

So let us pray. As we wait for Christ's coming—once in Bethlehem, now in our midst—may light take root in our shadows, and hope rise where we least expect it. And may we go from this service watching for the small, surprising ways God is already drawing near. Amen.