



Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
December 1, 2019

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

A miserly old man was determined to prove everyone wrong and take his fortune with him when he died. So he told his wife to stuff all his cash into two pillowcases and place them in the attic right above his bed – his plan was for his soul to grab the sacks of money as it ascended to heaven.

The man died and, of course, his wife was grief stricken, so it was several weeks before she had the energy to start cleaning up the house. She went into the attic with her daughter, discovered the two sacks of cash still sitting there, and exclaimed “that darned old fool, I knew I should have put that money in the basement!”

It’s human nature, of course, that we’re always looking for some way to work the system, like the man in the joke. Jesus seems to be cautioning us against that way of thinking in the gospel for this First Sunday of Advent. “Keep awake,” he says, stay alert, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” We’d like to know. We’d like to be able to figure out all the ins and outs of Jesus’ second advent – his second coming – so we could do whatever we want until the last possible moment and then get all our affairs in order just in the nick of time – but Jesus warns us that advents aren’t something that can be gamed out. That’s just life.

If we knew when our favorite lottery numbers were coming up we’d buy a ticket that day. If we knew when our team was going to win we’d place a bet on that game. If we knew when we were going to get sick next we might do all sorts of things differently. But that’s not how life works. Life, someone has said, is just one darn thing after another. Or, we might say, life is just one surprise after another – some good surprises and some bad ones.

Jesus uses the story of Noah’s flood to illustrate what it looks like when we completely neglect to prepare for the inevitable surprises that life will bring. Complete neglect of preparation, he says, looks like the people in Noah’s day. They were just living for the thrill of the moment, for whatever fun they could wring out of that day, that minute, that party, until the end came and overwhelmed them. Worse than that, they were living

lives of violence and exploitation, using and being used by one another for whatever financial or personal gain could be squeezed out of that moment.

As a bit of an aside, I'd like to point out something that you may not have noticed before about this passage of scripture. Jesus says that his second advent, his second coming, will be like the flood in the sense that his coming will sweep people away. Two will be in the field and one will be swept away and one left. Two will be working in the kitchen together and one will be swept away and one left.

For reasons I don't quite understand, this particular illustration – of one taken and one left behind – has come to be interpreted by some modern, American Christians to mean that one person will be raptured up to heaven and one person left behind on earth to suffer. There was a whole series of books a few years back with just that title: *Left Behind*. But that's not what Jesus is saying here. He's saying that as in the story of the flood, when the waters swept some away and left Noah behind in the ark, so at his second coming some will be swept away by his advent the way the flood swept people away and some will be left behind to go on living the way Noah was left behind to go on living.¹

What Jesus is really saying is that we want to be left behind – we want to be in a position to survive whatever unexpected and overwhelming floods are coming our way: from unexpected sickness to the unexpected end of the world.

How, then, do we survive the coming of the unexpected?

Jesus' advice is that we live our lives in a way that we are, as much as possible, prepared at all times for surprises. Instead chasing the fool's gold of trying to game the system and figure out what's coming next, he says, we should be looking at how to live a life that is ready for the unexpected at all times – not a life that hopes to get ready at just the last minute.

In my years of trying to live the spiritual life, and trying in some small way to help others live it, I've come to think of physical exercise as one of the best analogies for the spiritual life. If I could see my future and know when clogged arteries were going to turn into a heart attack or when weakened muscles were going

1. See Paul J. Nuechterlein. www.girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/advent1a/#N_1

to turn into a bone-breaking fall, then it might be possible for me to sit on the sofa eating cheeseburgers until just the very last moment before it became dangerous. Then, at that moment, I could change my diet and start an exercise regimen.

But I don't know. I don't know exactly how many unhealthy meals I can eat before it catches up to me or how long I can go without exercise before I pay the price. So, every doctor and every nutritionist will tell me the same thing: exercise some every day. Eat healthy every day. Live each day as though that were the day that would make the difference between being healthy and being sick.

So it is with the spiritual life. We don't know when the moment of difficulty will come – be that difficulty as mundane as the temptation to sin to help ourselves out or something as grand as the end of the world and judgment day. So, we have to live each day as though that were the day that would make the difference between a healthy spiritual life and a diseased spiritual life.

In a spiritual sense that means that we attend to the basic spiritual exercises day in and day out, week after week. It means we say our prayers each day, that we look every day for the chance to do good and help others, and that we confess our sins and receive the holy eucharist every Sunday. By such simple, routine attention to our spiritual lives we stay open to what God is doing and we learn, bit by bit over time, to be prepared to lean on Christ's love no matter what surprises life brings our way.

There's an old saying you might have heard from old Christians, and the truth of this saying is what we learn by our daily and weekly exercises of prayer, service, confession, and eucharist. That old saying is this: ain't nothin' gonna happen today that me and Jesus can't handle. We're only swept away when we try to stand on our own without the one who made us and loves us. But when we learn to stand in his love there ain't nothin' we can't handle – even the end of the world.

Amen.