

*“Hope Is a Star”*

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*Reading: Romans 13.11-14*

Besides this, 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 armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

*Matthew 24.36-44*

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

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

This reading seems an odd choice for the very first Sunday of a new church year. Surely in Advent we would want to hear a hint of the wonderful story that is about to unfold – the angel messengers, and the young mother and father, the shepherds and wise men. The baby. The sheer magic and miracle of that holy, precious night with a star shining high over a stable in Bethlehem. Wouldn't we expect to begin at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew? Wouldn't we expect something that tells us of hope?

Instead we begin at the end of the story, toward the end of Jesus' life, when he is talking about the very end of time, and giving a pretty scary description. Here we find him sitting with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, two days before that final Passover, that first communion meal. He is trying to tell them about what is to come, both immediately and in those cosmic end days, when as the story goes Christ is to return in glory. We sang about it this morning, 'Lo, he comes with clouds descending'.

So you can see how this story fits in the lectionary, and the annual cycle of our Christian storytelling. If the church year begins with the coming of the baby, then continues through the winter, recounting his life and ministry with fishermen and townspeople, his teaching and healing, his kind words and his sharp rebukes. Then the story of his transfiguration leads us into Lent and then his arrest and death on Good Friday, and his rising at Easter. Then in spring we hear of his final goodbyes and of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the companion, to the disciples at Pentecost. The season after Pentecost takes up almost half the church year, through the summer and into the fall, in which we follow the adventures of the early church and recall with those first Christians the many stories of Jesus that they told to each other and to the world. Then as the fall closes in, we begin to hear *these* stories, hard for us moderns to take in, of his coming again, stories of end times and coming in glory. We hear that Christ, the Son of Man, will return.

But how does he return? As a baby. The lectionary cycle brings the ship in so that the story of the end becomes the story of the beginning. The distant past and the unimaginable future come together in our celebration of the first of Advent, and we hear Jesus calling from the Mount of Olives down through the centuries, 'You do not know when it will happen. The arrival will be unexpected. Be alert!'

Advent celebrates God's entrance into the world, the coming of Christ, in the past, present and future. In Advent, we remember together the story of the birth of the baby Jesus. We participate in the warmth and wonder of the season in the lives we are living. And we look into the future, watching for new births, and new worlds emerging. But what Jesus says in this passage is that we could miss it.

And isn't that true? Isn't it just literally true that we never know when the spirit of generosity and love will break through? Christmas time can be depressing. The Santa Claus parade and the decorations in the stores seem to come too early. Every day the mail and the newspaper bring another four pounds of paper that tells us what to buy. If you don't eat this, drink that, wear the other, you won't be having enough fun. If you don't spend, you'll miss the magic. (Sidebar – and that is a lie – and our YouthonBloor and university supper group are going to work on alternatives next week). What surrounds us can be too much, and some days we may begin to identify with Scrooge, just wanting to shout bah, humbug! And yet into that frenzy of preparation, unexpectedly breaks the holy child, God's own self, the hopeful truth. It can happen in the lineup at the post office, or as you watch a TV commercial, or as you listen to a phrase of Christmas music that evokes a whole world. Eternity and transformation are suddenly present in the midst of our daily grind.

And as Christians we say, watch for that. Be full of yearning *and* full of hope. Let that hope be what allows you to see the coming of the Christ. But let your hope and your sense of yearning be open to the unexpected. Let it be open-ended.

The carol we sing says that hope is a star. A body of light that inspires and leads. A distant light, that does not flood the heavens, but merely points the way. The wise

magi of our Christmas star story did not know exactly where they were going, nor what they would find. Yet they followed.

When we say, hope is a star, we are saying that hope is more than a feeling. Hope is actually a practice. We practice hope when we go to a food bank to pack food, or when we go to a food bank to receive a bag of groceries. We practice hope when we work to change a system that leaves so many hungry.

We practice hope when we give a call to someone who longs to hear our voice. We practice hope when we accept graciously a child's crudely made handicraft. We practice hope when we sit at a desk writing cheques to the various groups who do the work of care and compassion here in Toronto and around the world. We practice hope when we watch through the long night of bereavement with a friend.

So, as Paul advises in the letter to the Romans, let us be aware that the long night is coming to an end. Let us wake up and get dressed. Let us be clothed in light – light of a star, light of Christ coming into the world. Let us watch and wait, let us practice hope. And as we come together to the table of shared bread and cup, let us remember that Christ is already there, Christ is the host. Amen.