

“Christian Freedom”
By Adam H. Fronczek

It's good to be with you this morning. I love this Sunday at church, the first Sunday of Advent, wreaths up in the worship space so that it looks and smells like Christmas is coming. I'm sure some of you spent the weekend putting up your trees and kids making their lists for Santa. And then, just when you thought it was time to get in the Christmas spirit, just when you started to get ready for your first round of holiday parties here comes today's scripture lesson: reminding us of those who were eating and drinking and having a good time in the days of Noah...and then the flood came and swept them away!

Those of you who are long-term regular churchgoers know to expect this kind of thing on the First Sunday of Advent. On this day just about every year, there is a strange passage like this one about the coming of the Son of Man, the sky darkening, warnings of things to come, and you know that you're going to have to live through two to three weeks of this stuff before you'll finally get to hear about shepherds and wise men, Mary and Joseph and Jesus. To make matters worse, these passages leading up to Christmas all say something like, “keep awake!” as if you needed that reminder in the midst of all that must be accomplished between today and December 25. I get it—I'm busy too. But give me about 15 minutes this morning—you're already here. Give me about 15 minutes to share with you a unique message for this time of year that comes from today's Scripture: While every other influence in our lives is adding things to your schedule and giving you more to do, there is a singularly different message here at church today; it is your first Christmas gift: it's an invitation: the opportunity to take a beat at the beginning of this season, look at the everyday things you're doing and think about what is really important to you—so that you don't waste your valuable time this December.

The invitation comes in a strange form; it's not immediately obvious that this is what the Scripture is about. The message of this passage starts up a few verses before today's assigned reading, back in verse 29: It's a prediction of the Coming of the Son of Man. That is cryptic New Testament talk meaning that after the present sufferings of this world have gone by, a day is coming when God will do something to transform the world.

The part we read today then goes on to talk about things you might have seen in movies or read about in books—some people being “taken up” while others are “left behind.” If it sounds like the world is coming to an end, well, for the people who were wrote this passage, there's good reason to believe that was what they hoped for. The Gospel of Matthew was probably written two or three generations after the life of Jesus toward the end of the first century; the Romans had just sacked Jerusalem. And if you don't know much about that time, suffice it to say that Jerusalem would have been a horrible place to be, especially if you were Jewish—enough so that you too probably would have prayed for God to come and take all the suffering away by any means necessary.

Now I know there are places in the world today that are still that desperate, however, I think it's safe to say that such a worldview is quite detached from what most of us experience day to day. Most of us are not praying today for the end of the world. But there is a thing that connects us to the original message of this passage. For most of us, we don't connect with this passage because of the longing for the future; we connect with the urgency of the present. As one scholar notes, "While the text may tilt toward a mysterious future day, it actually remains firmly put in an ordinary present day." (Yurs, *Feasting on the Word*, A1).

This message for the present comes in the form of four illustrations in a row that all have the same plot—a plot that gives us a message for today. First, the author Matthew goes way back to the beginning of the Bible and remembers the story of Noah and the flood. Noah was a righteous man with his mind on the most important things, so he heard God's voice saying, stop what you're doing and build an ark. But everyone else was just going along, eating, drinking, and marrying it says. And then one day it started to rain, and Noah got into the ark, and all of the folks who hadn't been paying attention—they were simply washed away. Matthew says be careful, for the same thing could happen in these days. It could happen to men out in the field or to women working in a mill—some of them are paying attention to the important things of life, but many others are just going through the motions, allowing life to pass them on by, so some will be taken up in God's vision for the future and others will be left. In case you missed the first three examples—the ark, the field, and the mill—Matthew offers a fourth: God's plan is like a man who owns a house who would have stayed awake and paid attention, if only he knew that a robber was coming that very night. But he didn't pay attention, and so he lost all that he had. Four examples in a row, each of them reminding us: pay attention to what is going on today. Don't just go through the motions of life, think about what is most important. Make sure you're making good use of this day God has given you, because far too often we are just going through the motions.

This is a far reaching message that may apply in any number of ways, so I thought I'd give you a couple of examples about how it might work out for a couple of different people. Here's one example. When our amazing visiting scholar AJ Levine was here a couple of weeks ago, Dee Decker Huey was riding in the car with her, and asked her, "AJ, you have so many great stories about your life, have you ever thought about writing a memoir?" AJ dismissed the idea immediately—didn't even have to think about it, and she knew the reason. She told Dee that she became convinced some time ago, that being a scholar and a teacher is what she's supposed to do. "That's the thing I'm supposed to do," she said, "and I try to do it well." Dee told us that story last week at a staff meeting, and I think most of us had the same reaction: "Wow!" To think you could be that sure about your purpose and your focus. What a gift. That's one way of being attentive to what is most important to you. And I'll admit upon hearing that story, I was somewhat jealous. Around the time I was a student in AJ's classes, I wanted that kind of focus, I wanted to be a great professor. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I too have a rather strong sense of what I'm supposed to do; it's just that it's not like AJ's description.

I love being a pastor because of the variety of it. Being in ministry, at least in a context like this one, means doing all kinds of different things. When I think of pastors who I look up to, I see men and women, who, sure, they could preach as sermon, but they also had the skills to manage a staff, and essentially run a small business. Good

pastors have a heart for pastoral care, for visiting the sick and counseling people who are troubled. Pastors spend time in social justice ministries in the city, and we meet with study groups and support ministries to children; we foster engagement in faith through art and music. And I love this calling because of all of that variety—because every day I get the chance to do any number of things. I know it's impossible for me to be as good at all of these things, or maybe any of them, as AJ is at her one thing. But my goal is different; I try to be pretty good at as many of those things as I can as often as possible. I pray that if I am doing that, God will grow me into the person God wants me to be. I have all the respect in the world for the way AJ does her job, but it isn't appealing to me at all.

Here's why I told you both of those stories. I am confident that in this community, rather than telling you what God is calling you to do, it's more important for me to put a good question before you and let you work it out for yourself. I don't believe that either AJ's calling or mine is the answer for everyone else. But I do think that both of them, and anything else that one might do, can only be done well with the message of Advent—the idea that whatever you are doing, we all have to keep awake. We all must consistently reexamine our life and our gifts and our craft and ask what God is calling us to do next or different or better. This applies to working as a scholar, or a minister; working in a field or in a mill, as a teacher, or a parent, or a lawyer. We all have the responsibility to examine whatever life that we are living and the gifts God has given us, and ask if we are making use of these things to the glory of God.

The purpose of Advent is to give us time for this discernment—Advent tells us, this is the time to check in and do a little self-examination as we get ready for Christ's arrival at Christmas. This is the time to ask if we are ready for God to show up in human form and ask how we're doing with the blessings we've been given.

Finally, some Christians read passages like this one, see that one will be working in the field and another left behind, and they think they're supposed to figure out how that's going to happen and when and which one they are. Don't be troubled by that. For the very first line of this lesson suggests something quite different: "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father..." No one knows the answers to those questions. Not even Jesus—only God! So don't worry about the when and the how that God's plan. What we are to attend to is to be sure that whether we are in the field or in the mill, the classroom, the home or the office, wherever we are today and in the days to come, that we are not simply letting life pass us by. That we are being attentive to the claim on our lives made by the God who created us.

Amen.