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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Advent 1/Year A/Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44

Never Left Behind

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

One of the fears that most human beings share in common is the fear of abandonment. At some point in our early lives, we all have known that terror-filled sense of emptiness that arises when our parents are late in picking us up, and we think we have been forgotten—and maybe we have been forgotten!—or that time when we are delivered to summer camp and left in the midst of a bunch of strangers, convinced that no one will like us--or a little later on in life when a special someone we are deeply attached to tells us that he or she needs or wants to end the relationship or “see other people”—or maybe that time when a parent or grandparent suddenly dies and it is impossible to imagine how life can go on without them.

Our own fear of abandonment sets us up to strongly identify with stories in which other people are experiencing devastating losses. Empathy is in our DNA. When I was thinking about our readings for today, I remembered a movie that was apparently on television every Christmas when I was a little kid. It was the most horrifying movie I had ever seen. King Kong and Godzilla could not hold a candle to the terror of this story. The title of the movie was “The Day They Gave Babies Away,” and it was based on an actual happening in the lives of the ancestors of those who captured the event in this drama. The setting of the story is rural Wisconsin in the 1860’s, and it features the Eunson family. Both parents die within a few months of each other, leaving six children. Twelve-year-old Robbie Eunson is the oldest and, after his mother’s death,

he sets out to keep the promise he made to his mother before her death—to find good homes for each of his younger siblings and for himself. It is Christmas Eve and Robbie spends his day visiting numerous neighbors, trying to convince them to take his newly orphaned brothers and sisters. As I recall, he gives each one’s “selling points” and warns each one, sometimes sternly, to behave well in his or her new family. After all, they have lost one set of parents and they should beware of the possibility of losing another.

As a child I could not imagine anything more horrific than losing my parents. The story of “The Day They Gave Babies Away” depicted for me an unbearable level of pain. It was heart-wrenching to watch—but, for some reason, I always watched it.

The fear of abandonment does not always fade with age. Sometimes it develops into a gnawing jealousy that infects relationships and paradoxically leads to the exact outcome that it was attempting to prevent. We hold on too tightly and smother those we love and are afraid of losing—inadvertently driving them away in the process. Or maybe we push people out of our lives rather than face the possibility that they might leave us. Or maybe we keep them around but hold them at arm’s length—depriving both sides of the sweetness of an intimate relationship.

Our common human fear of abandonment has made today’s gospel reading an especially powerful one. “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.” Those are scary words. The idea of being unexpectedly snatched away and the idea of having someone we love snatched away are both frightening thoughts. I’ll never forget a particular young woman who came to me for psychotherapy many years ago because she was fraught with anxiety over the possibility of

these words from Matthew being literally true—so frightened of the possibility of either being left behind or leaving someone else behind. There was no way to win.

But, the message from Matthew isn't meant to scare us. He doesn't say that we should be fearful. He reports that Jesus says that the thing we must do is “wake up.” Jesus says that we should be prepared—that we should live our lives in a state of readiness for the coming of the one whom Matthew sometimes calls the “Son of Man.” We should want to be ready because we don't want to miss him.

As our understanding of God has changed over the years, perhaps we have come to believe that this passage may not be describing literal, factual truth. Perhaps we have come to believe that it would be impossible for God to abandon us or leave anyone behind. We realize that the “God of steadfast love and mercy”—affirmed in scripture over and over again--is one whose back will never be turned away from us. A friend of mine became so determined to share this message that she had a bumper sticker printed that read, “You will not be left behind.”

The much greater danger for us is that we will be the ones who do the abandoning. We abandon God by abandoning the Divine spirit that dwells within us and among us and throughout all creation. Again and again, we get distracted by our many concerns and fascinations and obsessions—and we forget that the Divine presence—sometimes called the Christ Consciousness—is in the here and now—calling us to follow now—to live more deeply, to love more generously, and to give ourselves away more completely. Advent is the time to re-commit and to prepare for Christ's coming today and in what we call the “fullness of time”—to wait in great expectation. Advent is the time to do what one of our favorite carols advises—“Let every heart prepare him room.”

It has been said that Christians are “Easter people in an Advent world.” We proclaim that the Messiah has already come in the form of the resurrected Christ and that we worship a risen savior. And yet, when we look around us, evidence of the Messiah’s arrival seems slim indeed. The Christian faith is a paradox. Somehow Easter and Advent must coexist. All has been accomplished--and all is yet to be accomplished. We celebrate Christ’s victory over death, and, at the same time, we wait expectantly for the reign of God to be fulfilled. Christ is risen, and swords are still swords—spears are still spears—war is still being learned. As impossible as it seems, the Prince of Peace reigns even in the midst of conflict and bloodshed and destruction.

Eschatology—the study of end times—is a confusing topic, even for professional theologians. Those who have dedicated their lives to studying and teaching and writing—and praying—have had very different understandings. Some of the most vexing questions over the years have had to do with what is called “the delay of the parousia.” Put in other words, the question is, “If the Messiah has already come—if Jesus truly is the Messiah—why has the kingdom not been established? Why are people still homeless and hungry? Why is there still oppression and injustice and victimization? Why do we not have peace on earth?” We do believe that the Messiah has come. So, how could it be that we don’t have peace?

The great German theologian Karl Barth calls “the age in which we live the time of ‘great positive possibility.’” It is because of Christ’s death and resurrection that we are able to proclaim that there is a future in which Christ will be all in all.

We believe that Christ comes every day and that it is our responsibility to stay awake and be prepared and recognize Christ’s incursions into our lives and into our world. Advent is a time of personal theological reflection—for asking ourselves the questions—Who am I? Who is

Christ in my life? What is Christ doing in my life? How does Christ come to me? What are the events and interactions of my life telling me about what Christ is doing? Do I invite him to come? Am I making room? Am I doing my part in bringing the kingdom of God to fulfillment?

Matthew says that Jesus compares the coming of Christ to the coming of a thief in the night. “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.” I think it would be good to rewrite that verse and make it read, “But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the guest was coming, she would have stayed awake and opened the door and invited the guest to come in.”

At Advent, we are called to look at life from a different perspective—to live our lives in anticipation and expectation—to watch carefully for how Christ is coming toward us, no matter what our circumstances or state of readiness, trusting that his coming will bring peace which surpasses all understanding. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.