

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week we ended the church year with Jesus in the Gospel according to Luke telling a doomed man, “You will be with me.” And I said that I could not think of a better last word from Jesus for us, now in our time, between Jesus’ first and second coming. Today we begin a new church year and a new Gospel, the Gospel according to Matthew. Matthew bookends his Gospel with the promise of God’s presence with us. He begins with the story of Jesus’ birth in chapter one and the announcement to Joseph that it was fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah of another child whose name, Immanuel, means “God is with us.” And the very last words of Matthew’s Gospel are Jesus’, sending his disciples out into the nations and promising to be with them always, to the end of the age. We’ll get to that first reading in three weeks. But I want you to see that the same promise that ends the three-year lectionary cycle also begins it, and if you remember nothing else about the beginning and the end of the church year, remember that it starts and finishes with Jesus’ promise that we will be with him and that he is with us through whatever is to come.

But if you have a little bit more storage space available this morning, I have a few more things to add. Three things, as it happens, all from this morning’s Gospel reading from toward the end of Matthew’s Gospel, focusing on Jesus’s return. We’re starting off the church year as we do every year by connecting the beginning to the end. Think of that as another meaning of the Advent wreath, that wraps around on itself. The three things I want to focus on here are Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in anticipation of the time when he will no longer be among them in the flesh. They are 1. To keep awake, 2. That they must be ready, and 3. That they are to trust the promise that he will return.

First, Jesus tells his disciples to “keep awake.” That’s kind of hard to hear in an age when many people are sleep-deprived and doctors are telling us that one of the most important things we can do for our health is to get plenty of sleep. For school-aged children that should be at least 9 hours. For teens, at least 8, and for adults at least 7. So is Jesus going against sound medical advice here and telling us that we should never sleep if we want to be his followers? Well, of course not. That would be a case of taking the Bible literally when it’s meant to be figurative. The Greek word here means awake more in the sense of being alert and tuned into what is going on around you rather than simple being conscious, in the same sense that being “woke” has entered our vocabulary. “Woke” is now a recognized word that Miriam Webster defines as “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues.” That might be the perfect word to translate the Greek here if it didn’t have the racial and social connotations it has in our context. So Jesus wants us not to be awake all the time in the literal sense, but alert and paying attention, aware of what’s going on around us. And I might add that that is exactly the reason we might also want to get appropriate amounts of sleep. The point is that Jesus doesn’t want us to go through life on cruise control or automatic (again, to use figurative expressions). Nor does he want us to be gripped by fear at the prospect of the world ending, or even of our own lives ending. These are all ways of living that turn us in on ourselves, and away from God and others. If we read just a little further in this chapter after our reading ends, we see that how Jesus intends his followers to live in these in-between times is to not obsess about when the end will come, because we don’t get to know that. We are instead to have an attitude and a disposition that directs our attention away from ourselves and toward the world we are invited to care for. That’s what being alert and paying attention are about.

Second, you must be ready, says Jesus. But what does it mean to be ready? Is it like preparing for an exam, where you have to make sure you have mastered all the material so that you are able to answer the questions you might be tested on? A lot of pressure, in that case. We'll need to do our homework for Jesus' return. Or is it maybe like the answer to the old Monday Night Football question, "Are you ready for some football?" In other words, does being ready for Jesus' return mean it's something you just have to want, something you're looking forward to, but that you don't really have to prepare for, beyond setting out the drinks and the snacks? No pressure at all, in that case, right? (I mean, unless you're serious about snacks or drinks.) You just need to want it. But there's still another possible sense of being ready that could apply here. Bread dough is ready to be baked when its yeast has made it rise. And it's ready to eat when it has been baked for the right amount of time. Wine is ready to be drunk when it has fermented and matured. The pressure in this case is external. Bread dough is kneaded. Grapes are pressed. And then time, biology, and chemistry do the rest. To say that we must be ready in this sense is to say that we must be *made* ready. The preparation is something that is done *to* us rather than *by* us.

I want to say that what Jesus means by being ready here can bear all of these meanings together, but that it proceeds in reverse order, and starts with the third thing on my list: Trusting in Jesus' promise to return and to bring the Kingdom of Heaven fully into being among us. What Jesus is doing with his disciples is first *making* them ready by getting them to trust him. His teaching and his time spent with them is changing their attitude and disposition, so that they are "ready for some Kingdom" if you see what I mean, so that they eagerly anticipate and hope for its coming. And then, when they're ready in that way, they of course will want to get ready in the first way by mastering the skills and behaviors that characterize God's Kingdom come.

The section that follows in this same chapter of Matthew, and that we don't get anywhere else in the lectionary in Matthew's version, gives us a vision of what Jesus has in mind for us. It is his hypothetical example of a servant put in charge of his master's household while the master is gone. The task the servant is given is to take care of the other servants by providing them their allotment of food. He doesn't know when the master is coming back. He will either do that job faithfully and care for those he is put in charge of, to his master's delight, or he will take advantage of the power he has been given and use it to serve himself, to abuse his fellow servants and to use their food to feast and carouse with his friends which will incur the master's anger on behalf of those who have been wronged. Jesus' own disciples have had their moments of thinking about their association with Jesus in this latter more self-centered way. They have vied for status among themselves. They have wanted to unleash divine power against their enemies. But Jesus has been working on them, to make them ready for his return.

And that good news for the disciples, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, is also good news for us, and what the church year and the liturgical calendar are all about. They are about that one thing I wanted you to remember, that Jesus is indeed with us. Jesus is present and active in our gatherings each week around word and sacrament, God's means of grace, making us ready for the fullness of God's Kingdom by nurturing our faith in the enduring promise of his presence, so that we eagerly anticipate his return, and joyfully attend to the care of the world God has entrusted us with. May we rejoice in that good news now and in the days to come. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.