

**“Wait ’Til the Midnight Hour”**  
Sermon preached at Church on the Hill  
Lenox, Massachusetts  
First Sunday of Advent • 3 December 2017  
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*Text: Mark 13:24-37*

In our Gospel passage Jesus repeatedly urges his disciples to watch, to be ever ready for the time that will suddenly come: the revealing of Messiah and of the realm of God. Let us prepare ourselves for the Word of God as it comes to us in the reading of Holy Scripture.

<sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup>and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup>Then they will see ‘the Human One coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>Then God will send out the angels, and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

<sup>28</sup>“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that it is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup>“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the *Abba*. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a person going on a journey, who leaves home and puts the slaves in charge, each with their work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

<sup>35</sup>Therefore, keep awake — for you do not know when the householder will suddenly come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup>— or else you may be found asleep. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (*NRSV, adapt.*)

**1**

Today begins Advent. The first day of the year, in the Christian calendar. Our year begins with a season of inward looking: acknowledging our ancient longing for God to set things right in a world that often goes terribly wrong; noting our place in the wrongness; praying our hope in the forgiving grace of God. Advent is a season of waiting. Thus the title of today’s reflection: “Wait ’Til the Midnight Hour.”

A disclaimer, here, for you who are familiar with Wilson Pickett’s song of the same title:

I’m gonna wait till the midnight hour  
That’s when my love comes tumbling down  
I’m gonna wait till the midnight hour  
When there’s no one else around...<sup>1</sup>

The “Wicked Mr. Pickett” wasn’t singing about Advent; the rest of the song heads in another direction. But no doubt: Advent is all about waiting, waiting in the hour when the light is weakest and the darkness most enveloping; waiting with profound hope but without knowing

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson Pickett, “In The Midnight Hour” (Atlantic Records, 1965).

exactly how that hope will be realized. So the hope lies not so much in knowing what is promised, but trusting the one doing the promising. So says Jesus: “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come” (Mk 13:33).

But that’s absurd, isn’t it? We all know when the time will come: four weeks from tomorrow. My goodness, ask any child. It’s all about Christmas. I once made the utterly foolish and classic mistake of telling a children’s story that asked whether the real gift was coming from Jesus or from Santa Claus. One youngster set me in my place: “Santa!” she said, with confidence and volume that would be the envy of any preacher.

So it is: we encounter the holiday season. There’s plenty of waiting going on, much of it for a Santa bringing gifts and warmth and cheer, not nearly so demanding or messy as a Messiah. Or for those whose memory reaches a few decades further there’s wait for a hint of more innocent times. Scenes of *Miracle on 34th Street* pop into awareness, where a true spirit of giving and love carried the day over crass commercialism. But that was always an airbrushed fantasy. The drive to buy has always had a core of brutality: shoppers trampled under the crush; grown adults fighting each other for the latest toy. As though there is anything we truly need that can be bought in a store. Our desire for stuff metastasizes until it strangles the soul.

Advent is waiting. But for what, or whom? Do we wait for a god of kindness and sweetness? Do we wait for a God that can face down the vile powers of the world and vanquish evil and hate? Or do we wait for a savior who enters the world with utter vulnerability, defenseless against all the things that terrify us? Even if we know the last one turns out to be the best answer, it’s good to remember how utterly nonsensical we would be to wait and hope for one whose only way of saving us is asking us to protect him.

## 2

In order to invoke the wonder of this season, let’s remember a time when the season’s celebrations started, among people called pagan — a name that just means that their faith and culture were based on the cycles of nature.<sup>2</sup> They saw the world as a cosmic struggle between the powers of darkness and the powers of light, like a celestial wrestling match. They watched the skies closely, and saw that during part of the year the darkness had the upper hand, and at other times the light seemed stronger. At this time of year, days were getting shorter. The darkness gained in strength, the sun weakened.

Then around December 21<sup>st</sup> a change began — as though the light had gotten a new charge, a burst of energy, enough to start pushing back the night. That observation gave birth to a celebration: the pagans celebrated the resurrection of the light. A sun feast.

When the Christians came along they adopted and adapted the pagan idea. They said, “The concept is solid. We know that if you’re talking about darkness and light, the true darkness of the world is sin, the actions that close us off from God, and the true light of the world, as we know it, is Jesus Christ.” So the Christians kept the concept. But instead of a feast celebrating the new cycle of the sun, s-u-n, they had a feast celebrating the birth of the son, s-o-n.

There was a lot more involved, including deep theological thinking and power plays by popes and emperors. But the struggle between light and dark is basic: a part of human

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from William J. Bausch, “The Meaning of Advent,” in *Telling Stories, Compelling Stories* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-third Publications, 1991), 132ff.

experience, a part of each of us. It gives us Advent: a season when what we most hope for is, at best, a fantasy. A season when we live in hope, but cannot know what the outcome will be. A season of longing, in the deep parts of our hearts and souls and bellies, for a revealing of light and hope that we can only imagine.

Jesus says, you can have no idea when this will occur. Wait for it in readiness.

### 3

Jesus and his followers lived under the brutal shadow of the Roman Empire. We have a fresh reminder of the kind of gloom and bleakness that they knew, in the tax bill that passed the U.S. Senate two days ago, which has more in common with the rapacious economic cruelty of an empire than with a democracy that seeks the well-being of the people. The vote was an act of violence. The legislation is a codification of violence that will bring increased harm to the vulnerable and a wider cushion to the comfortable. And yet, the bill is merely a symptom, like a boil on the flesh of a person infected with the plague. The deep problem is a sickness that reaches throughout our society. A sickness we could call heartlessness, and bigotry, and nationalism.

The vile powers of our society's worst tendencies are ascendant. Like Jesus' neighbors long ago, we wait more with despair than with hope.

You know the kind of waiting Jesus meant. It's not the impatient cry, "I've been waiting in this line for 30 minutes!" Not that kind, but rather, "I've been waiting for three weeks now for my insurance company to approve a procedure that will relieve me from pain." That's the waiting of Advent: waiting in a bleak time, for an outcome still unknown but filled with the promise of hope.

"We've been waiting for eighteen months to get word that they've approved our application to adopt a child." That's the waiting of Advent: from the concrete corridors of bureaucratic lifelessness, looking toward a light that has not yet glimmered in the eastern sky.

"We've been waiting for an end to this conflict, an end to the constant terrors and stress, a day when we can walk in the streets without fearing for our lives." That is the waiting of Advent: surviving in a gloom-ridden and angry time, hoping beyond hope for the light of peace.

"We've been waiting for years now, to return from exile, to return to our homeland, to farm our own soil, to grow what we eat, to honor the place where our parents and grandparents labored and loved." That is the waiting of Advent: wandering in a hostile and lonely time, holding fast to the dream of reuniting with the place where we knew fullness of life.

### 4

Let me tell you, I do not wish to wait so long. I do not wish to wait so long for an end to hunger and misery and hate. Can't that day come sooner, God? And Jesus says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Abba, the strong tender parent of all" (13:32). No person knows the day and hour of death. No one knows the day and hour of God's transforming arrival. So be aware. Keep alert.

No person knows. And not knowing about *that* time means that our attention and devotion and love are best invested in *this* time.

You cannot keep alert when your thoughts are on the hope that has not yet arrived: alertness means looking around you here, now. You cannot be aware of your neighbor's need if you are focused on the dream of a rescue: now, and here, has need of you.

## 5

We cannot know the hour of our death; we cannot know the day when God's realm will be revealed. And so we live in this time, treasuring joys and sharing sorrows just as Jesus did himself.

Waiting seems lonely. But strangely enough it gives us the best company of all. Who around you is waiting for God's dream of peace and hope to become more real in our lives? Go to them. Wait together. Watch together. Hope together. We are a great cloud of witnesses. Watch and wait. And know this: God is waiting, too.

God is waiting for our perception to clear, for our eyes to become accustomed to the dark in order that we may perceive the flickering glimmer of hope. We will never meet the Messiah by rushing to buy a present. But God is waiting with eager longing for us to turn back to the source of goodness and love. God is waiting for us, we are waiting for God. Watch and wait, together with the Holy One.

And in case this is the first sermon you have heard, or in case it is the last one you hear: go place yourself alongside someone who could use the companionship and wait for the midnight hour, when all undeserved and unexpected, love's own self comes tumblin' down, as sure as starlight falls on those who wait.