

**Yr. A, Advent 1**  
**December 1, 2019**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1363 Words**

**Lessons:     Isaiah 2:1-5**  
**Psalm 122**  
**Romans 13:11-14**  
**Matthew 24:36-44**

When? This is the first question the disciples—the *friends* of Jesus—ask. He has just described the worst kind of future imaginable. Jesus predicts a complete apocalyptic meltdown in chapter 24 of Matthew's Gospel. So, the only thing left to ask is "When?"

We get the not-so-comforting answer in this morning's Gospel lesson. Jesus' answer to the disciples' question of when all these things will take place is simply, "I don't know."

Don't think for a minute this has prevented many arrogant Christian leaders—and *mis*-leaders—from asserting their specific views about the timing of the last days. It is unfortunate those with the largest media budgets are the ones with the least humility when it comes to claiming more knowledge than the Son of God about these things.

The truth is we are stuck with the unsatisfying answer of Jesus—"I don't know." And then, his crisp, clear warning. "Keep alert," he says. "Be ready."

I have been playing a similar broken record for my daughters for years, and even more this past week as we moved our 2<sup>nd</sup> daughter to the 'big city.'

"Keep alert," I warned.

"I will, dad."

"Pay attention when you walk down the sidewalk at night...*and* in the daytime."

"Don't worry, dad. I will."

"Be sure to make eye contact with drivers before you enter the crosswalk."

"um, hm."

"You cannot be too careful, sweetie."

(Silent head nod.)

We can only absorb so many warnings, from our dads and moms...even from Jesus. We want specific answers to our particular questions, not broad warnings about all the possible uncertainties. Another timely example is the chorus of warnings about climate change.

"We must take drastic action about climate change," the overwhelming majority of climate scientists warn us once again this week.

"I'm not really sure they are right," many say.

"Storms, wildfires, and heat waves are intensifying," the experts warn.

"That's not my problem," many people believe.

"Glaciers are melting and coral reefs are dying," the scientific reports conclude.

"What can I do?" we are tempted to shrug.

Does it seem impossible to keep alert for every frightening thing that might happen? Does it feel exhausting, trying to be ready for every uncertainty? Our attempts to keep alert and be ready help contribute to the anxiety and depression many people feel.

You see, there is an expectation—in our jobs, our culture, our families, and even in our churches that we should pay less attention to more things. We only have so much attention we can pay, don't we? So we spread it out thinly.

One of the realities of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that many of us are paying continuous, partial attention to many things at once. We can have several apps running on our phones at the same time. We can check emails and texts, news feeds and Instagram posts, all with a touch of our fingers. We can play music in the background, follow a couple of football games on TV, and glance at a newspaper or a magazine.

Yet, none of this is soaking in very deeply. None of this has any power to change our assumptions...or habits...or doubts. None of our superficial attention will ever give us the courage to beat a sword into a plowshare. None of our partial attention to the needs of the world will ever inspire us to transform a spear into a pruning hook. None of our comforting distractions will ever open our minds to learn more about the ways of God...or the needs of other people...or the risk of walking in the pathways of God's justice and peace.

Speaking of continuous, partial attention, I can't even write a sermon at my desk in the Church office. In order to pray and think deeply about the Scriptures I have to find a quiet place off site with no distractions. Even though you don't have to write a sermon, the same thing might be true for you.

Do you need a quiet place with no distractions in order to pray? Identify that place for yourself this week. Do you need a quiet time with no distractions in order to read the Scriptures? Put that time on your calendar or set that alarm on your phone this week. How might a little bit of deep, full, *undivided* attention change your life?

What I am about to tell you will sound unbelievable, but it is true. I can show you a video of six people tossing a ball around in a small area, and ask you to pay attention to how many throws take place, and more than half of you will totally miss seeing someone walk from the right of your screen in a gorilla outfit; stop in the dead center of that small group; face the camera and beat his chest; and then turn again and strut off the scene.

Unfortunately, I have ruined this experiment by Research Psychologist, Daniel Simon, for you, because you will know to look for the gorilla, but you can try this You Tube experiment on your friends and be amazed.

The thing is, we seem to be able to *either* count basketball passes by a few people *or* see a ridiculous-looking, out of place gorilla right in front of our eyes. This short video reveals the cost of our continuous, partial attention in life. We are literally blinded to what should be obvious. Our distracted attention from what is just and true, good and faithful, deep and transforming...it is taking an enormous toll on us, our communities, our nation, and our world.

We will never observe, think, and pray deeply enough to be open to God's Spirit if we refuse to keep alert for God's Spirit among us here and now. We will never be willing to make any real changes that are life-giving if we neglect to be ready to heed the call of Jesus Christ in our midst.

Let's admit it. What we want are answers to our questions. What Jesus Christ is offering instead are warnings about our distractedness. Getting answers puts the burden on someone else. Paying attention puts the burden directly on us.

Today marks a new year in the Church. Take this new beginning as a chance to practice being more awake to the call of a God who wants *you* to spend more time praying—in your thoughts, with your words, and *then* by your deeds! Be resolved *not to pray for anything* this year that you are not willing to become personally involved in...*with God and your neighbors*.

This is your new year as a living member of Christ's Body. *Take this new beginning* as a chance to practice being ready to seek and serve Christ in other people.

Be ready to strive for justice and peace in the radical ways which the prophet, Isaiah, dreamed. Be ready to respect other peoples' dignity and to love your neighbor as much as yourself, like Jesus commanded. Be ready to share the Good News of Christ's love, not just with words but also by setting an example. Be ready to persevere against evil and admit when you are wrong. Be ready to dig more deeply into the apostles' teaching and fellowship, into worship and prayer within this faith community.

This is *your new year*. Don't be afraid to commit yourself to a little more deep, full, undivided attention to the encompassing love of God in your life...even though it is scary to be changed, by God. Nonetheless, you can trust that you will discover that a more deeply rooted and more fully connected life is a better life and a healthier life...for us, our neighbors, our community, our nation, our environment, and the world.

“When? When will all this transformation take place?” you might ask.

It happens whenever we say ‘yes’ to God...keeping awake to all the opportunities...being alert to all the invitations described by the prophet, Isaiah: opportunities and invitations for us to “stream toward God’s Presence” and “walk in God’s paths” and “learn from God’s ways” how to better “walk in the (glorious, life-changing) light of our Lord.”

Amen.