

Year A, 2016
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Advent I
St. Matthew 24:36-44

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

It is a strange way how the Church begins a new liturgical year. We're waiting for the birth (most of us chaffing at the bit and all ready to sing Christmas carols) and the lectionary wants to talk about the End and the return of Christ. It will be like "the flood" or like "a thief in the night." Well, cheer up! Last year we started Advent with stars falling out of the sky. This year all we have is "one will be taken and one will be left." Mild by comparison, don't you think? Conflicting hopes and expectations don't just begin with Advent. Thanksgiving Day this past Thursday was followed by Black Friday the very next day, when Americans "trample each other for sales exactly one day after being thankful for what they already have" (from www.sun.gazing.com).

But, of course, in America we have another problem, because some of us have in our minds the 19th century notion of "the rapture." Seven years before the return of Christ all true Christians will be caught up into heaven to be with Christ and, while avoiding the "tribulations" on earth, prepare for the final invasion and destruction of the Anti-Christ and his army of evil-doers. Does that sound fantastical to you? Well, I hope so, because it is. It is an idea dreamt up by a man named Darby in the 1800s. Oh, he found some biblical texts to support his fantastical ideas (in 1st Thess. 4:16f and to a lesser extent Matthew's passage of today), but for over 1800 years of Christian interpretation, no one else ever saw what he saw. So, let's set Darby's idea aside and come to this Sunday's gospel with our minds free of such schemes. The return of Christ (or in this case "the Son of Man") is an affirmation that Christ belongs not simply to the past and the present, but to the future as well. That is an article of faith worth hanging on to.

And just when will that be? Only the Father knows. What will be the sign of this return? It will be like the days of Noah: "They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." In other words, they were just living ordinary lives. The problem is that they expected their lives would always be ordinary.

I'm not a physicist, but I am intrigued with the unpredictability theory

of Quantum mechanics. Most actions of sub atomic particles (that is, everything that is) are predictable, thus providing stability of structure in the universe and our world. But a few are not, thus allowing for creativity. Sometimes what was not expected happens. In the days of Noah they were living ordinary, predictable lives and expected that things would always be ordinary and predictable. So, in spite of Noah's ark-building, they got caught in the cataclysm (which is the actual word Matthew uses). Sometimes "creativity" is cataclysmic and unexpected—not always, but sometimes.

At first glance our lesson gives us a similar view of unpredictable creativity—one is taken and one is left. Because of the "rapture" influence, we assume the one taken is taken into heaven to be with Christ. What if the ones taken means the ones destroyed by the cataclysm, while the ones left behind were spared—spared because they were aware, awake and attune? Except for the influence of the 19th century rapture theology there is nothing in the text to disallow that interpretation. Being awake and aware is the theme of all of our readings. As St. Paul says, "It is not the moment for you to wake from sleep."

The technical term for the Second Coming of Christ is the "Parousia." It comes from two Greek words and means literally "being present," or "being alongside." You see, the resurrection and ascension of our Lord was not a divorce that left us forlorn, abandoned, and left to our own devices. Is it possible that all those moments when we were awake enough and aware enough to sense the presence of Christ with us were really a Second Coming of Christ for us? And what if this idea of His return is really an expression of their conviction that what had begun in Christ Jesus would be completed, brought to fruition and implemented? That's what I understand the Second Coming to mean. Jesus prayed, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That kingdom would be a very different kind of kingdom and bring to us a very extraordinary kind of life—of a kingdom where force is rejected but power is embraced; where we love even our enemies and pray for our persecutors, where the poor are blessed and the peacemakers are happy; where the mighty are brought down and the lowly lifted up; when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; [where] nation shall not lift up sword against

nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Advent always begins with the End—the end of the ordinary and the beginning of the extraordinary. It begins with the hope that we will finally come to see that it has already begun, continues to advance, and will come to its perfection, as the kingdom of heaven becomes the kingdom on earth. Advent comes with the hope that we will be awake, alert, connected and engaged so that we don't allow the ordinary to blind us to the extraordinary. While much of the world is caught up in eating, drinking, marrying and being merry, we see and connect with God's purposes and know that “we walk in the light of the Lord.” Amen.