

Sermon Advent 1 Year A

[RCL] Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 26:36-44; Psalm 122

Be Awake and Ready

The hippopotamus is an awfully deadly animal. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica hippos are the sixth most deadly mammal to humans on the planet. Hippos follow elephants, horses, deer, tigers, and of course, other humans as the most dangerous mammals to human beings. Most of us, I suppose, think of hippos as cute and cuddly, serene, floating in the waters of Africa. Those who have been on or near those waters know that the hippopotamus is an extraordinarily aggressive and territorial animal that is very prone to attack.

There is an amazing athlete named Juliet Starrett. She is a two-time extreme whitewater canoe champion, she is also a lawyer and a survivor of cancer. A few years ago Juliet was canoeing through the Zambezi River in Eastern Africa. It was on that trip that her canoe was disturbed by a hippopotamus. Not so much disturbed as exploded. The way that Juliet tells it, she was paddling along one second and the next she was ten feet in the air above the water. She says that she looked down and saw the chomping jaws of the hippo turning her performance canoe into splinters. While in the air, Juliet says that she spotted the nearest shore and began swimming - *while in the air!* She was swimming in mid-air!

That kind of thinking while in the midst of a disorienting and dangerous tragedy, that cool appraisal of the situation and the prioritization of survival, that kind of thinking demonstrates what is sometimes called the “ready-state.” Ready-state is a notion of health in any particular situation or system. A good ready-state in an immune system for example would be the ability to bounce back from an illness quickly and completely. Ready-state can also be used to describe relationships. Ready-state relationships are healthy and resilient.

In a person, a ready-state is characterized by the ability of that person to enter into just about any situation with equanimity and openness. Fragility, on the other hand, is the opposite of ready-state. Ready-state is not about being anxious and hyper-vigilant, but is instead about mindfulness and well...readiness.

Most of all ready-state is due mostly to advance-work, namely: training. Consistent, intentional training, over time, allows for the ready-state. Juliet, the canoer on the Zambezi, was not expecting or planning for the hippo attack, instead she was simply trained and ready; and when the time came, her training and general ready-state kicked in.

In today’s gospel passage, Jesus is reminding us that not even he, nor the angels, know when God will come. Some like to think that God will come in terrible retribution with flames and violence. These

people look for signs in international politics and weather patterns that God is coming to judge and destroy the world. This is the Day of the Lord, the great apocalyptic coming of God to be with the creation fully. The reason that so many doom-sayers with signs that say, “The End is Nigh,” say what they say is because the prophets and gospel writers, even Jesus, used language like this: great tribulation, division, floods of fire and water.

The point they are trying to make is that when God comes to be fully wedded to creation, the existing order of things will be reversed. Instead of violence and oppression being used to secure economic and political flourishing for some, the Kingdom of God will be established so that peace and justice will walk hand-in-hand.

These reversals of the worldly ordering of life is a trademark of God’s presence and it always comes as a surprise because that kind of life, one marked with peace, justice, presence and love can be achieved in the here and now.

And Jesus, in today’s reading, is calling us to be awake and prepared for it. Jesus is reminding us of the importance to be in a ready-state for God’s coming. This is part of what Advent is all about. Advent, it turns out is not, *is not*, a countdown of shopping days until Christmas but a reminder of the ready-state, a call to training our spirits for God’s arrival.

The Christian tradition recognizes that God has come, and will come, to be with us in three distinct ways.

The first coming of God was when God walked with us in Jesus of Nazareth. We will celebrate that coming in a few weeks at the Feast of the Incarnation, otherwise known as Christmas.

Another coming of God is the final coming which Jesus makes mention of in today’s reading, when God and creation will be as they were meant to be, fully united. The strongest image the Bible has for this union is a marriage between God and creation and, make no mistake, heaven is coming to Earth (Rev. 21).

The third coming of God happens between the first coming and the final coming of God, between the coming of Jesus and the final marriage of God and creation. This coming of God is the daily visitation: God with us in our prayers, finding God in our neighbors, seeing God in those we are privileged to serve.

What we see in these three visitations is that all of them are the hoped for Day of the Lord. Each of these visitations carries with it the reversals of the normal, worldly order but also the loving and just presence of God.

How are you in a ready-state for God’s coming? How then can we be awake and watchful for the coming of God, whether in the final coming of the daily visitation of God?

There is a telling portion of Scripture that happens when the disciples have just seen Jesus ascend into Heaven. The disciples are looking up, dumbfounded. Finally, some angels appear and ask, “Why are you looking up, trying to find him?” The implication is, “Don’t look up to find Jesus, look out, look in.”

Jesus is always one step ahead, going into the city, into Galilee, into life, we are meant to seek and find him there. That’s how we stay ready for God’s coming, we daily, hourly stay on the lookout for God, not in the clouds, not in the powerful events of the world, but in the quiet, domestic ways that God visits us. God may indeed someday come in the clouds but it more than likely will come in your life.

Advent is a reminder of the ready-state, be awake and ready for God. This is why Advent tends to be described as preparatory, not just for the great celebration of Christmas but for the final coming of God and also for the ever-present daily visit of God with us in the here and now.

God is not as deadly as the hippo, but God is as disruptive to our normal hard-hearted ways as the hippo was to the canoer on the Zambezi. Be ready, be awake because the love of God will disrupt, explode and turn over our comfortable notions of how things ought to be. God will launch us into the air and into the waters of justice, peace, presence and love. It can be disorienting, but if we have trained ourselves to be ready, then we might work with God to establish God’s Kingdom more deeply in our hurting world.

Let us pray: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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