

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:11-23; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:37-44

The hour has come for you to wake from sleep.

A German missionary in Africa brought a beautiful collection of colorful pictures from home to help illustrate his sermons. They became very popular with the natives. One day, after the missionary had preached on hell and the natives studied the frightening picture of hell after the service, he heard howls of laughter and delight. With righteous indignation, he asked what was so funny about hell. “Look,” they said, “all the people there are white.”

Wouldn't it be nice to be immune to the danger, to have hell be what everyone else has to worry about? Wouldn't it be nice to be sure that each day will be like the next, not to bother expecting the unexpected? Wouldn't it be nice if warnings of looming judgment were what everyone else needed? Wouldn't it be nice? I suppose it would, but I hope nice isn't where you are now, because the warnings in our lessons today are not only for everyone else, but for us.

There were plenty of warnings at the time of Noah. Mankind did not go to pot overnight, and the signs of its corruption were hardly hidden. Surely there were those among the sons of God who had warned of the perilous repercussions of their actions, for our God is a God of warning. He does nothing spur of the moment. He wants none to be lost. There were plenty of warnings, but, in most cases, each warning was confronted by two deaf ears.

There were plenty of warnings at the time of St. Paul. As young churches aged, as new converts became established believers, many grew tired and sleepy. As day after day passed with no second coming, they were lulled into lethargy and laziness. St. Paul urges, almost begs, *“The hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”*

Consciences do not dull overnight. No, they're dulled over time. As a blade dulls by contact with rough surfaces, our consciences dull by contact with the rough and corrupting ways of the world. You can probably remember the first time you committed many sins. It's all the times after that that are harder to remember, because sin becomes easier with practice.

“Let us walk properly,” St. Paul says, but habits are easier to develop than to break. It's easier to dip your toes in immorality than it is to pull yourself out of the pond. Why? Sinners like sin. The sinful nature's taste buds aren't picky—their fine with any of the trash you may serve—but when it comes to God's will, they have no taste for it.

“Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.” Can you be proud of all you've thought, said, and done in the recent past? Would you gladly come up here and give an account of every minute of your day to those of us gathered, or are there things you'd gladly leave out? Have you looked at others as objects to be used instead of neighbors to be served and fellow children of God? Have you given to another what belongs only to your spouse, or future spouse, should God give you one? Have brief and wicked pleasures been higher on your list of priorities than the obedience of those who have received eternal life? Have you quarreled unnecessarily when you really should have made peace or turned the other cheek? Have you been jealous of the possessions, the gifts, or the good fortune of another? Have you walked properly as in the daytime? If not, uh oh, because these are the ways of those not

ready. The word used for “*destroy*” in the Hebrew is also the word for “*corrupt*.” God, in destroying the world, gave them, in their corruption, what they themselves had chosen.

“*For as were the days of Noah,*” Jesus begins our Holy Gospel, and we are living in the days of Noah. Corruption and violence surrounds us and sucks us in, for all flesh has corrupted its way, our flesh included. But the verse before our first lesson reads, “*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*” The favor of God is His grace. When you think of the favor of God, think of His face. In the benediction, I say, “*The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.*” The favor, or grace, of God has everything to do with how He looks at you.

So how does He look at you? The answer to that question depends upon how you look at Him. Noah looked at Him as Father, as Savior, as unbreakable Promise. Noah took Him at His Word. Noah knew His own unworthiness, and, if you read Genesis, Noah’s unworthiness will be clear, but Noah also knew the one thing about God we dare never forget: the Lord wants us on that ark, He wants us to make it through the waters.

How do you look at God? Look at Him as Father, as Savior, as unbreakable Promise. Know that He wants you on the ark, He wants you to make it through the waters. Why else would He warn you? God wants your eyes on the skies so that when He comes you see in Him not your damnation but your salvation, because you see Him through faith, for the writer to Hebrews reminds us, “*By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*”

“*Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*” You can’t swim out of that pond into which you first dipped your toes so long ago, but He can pull you out. Grab on to the wood of His cross, even as Noah found life in the wood of the ark. Drink deeply of the spiritual caffeine Christ has poured forth from His side and into the chalice. Wake up, and see, while there is time, how desperately your Lord Jesus longs to save you, how far He has gone in His suffering and death to do just that.

All the people in hell aren’t white, but there are plenty of white people there, as there are people of every color, age, walk, and standing, because no one is immune, because hell is not what everyone else is in danger of, hell is what we are in danger of, because all flesh is corrupt, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Thankfully, “*God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son,*” and He is “*the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.*”

Today is your warning. Don’t confront it with two deaf ears, but with two ears open as Christ’s arms on the cross. Most are not interested in Christ’s coming, because most are not in His house when He comes every week, but you don’t need to be most, you need to be on the ark, for that is where the baptized belong. What’s to say that for those for whom this coming of Christ, this chance to meet Him in God’s service, is too early, His second coming won’t be the same. Jesus is coming. Wake up! He is coming today through His Word and in His Supper, and He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. “*The hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand.*” Amen.