

ISAIAH 2:1-5

PSALM 122

ROMANS 13:11-14

MATTHEW 24:36-44

First Sunday of Advent; Hope

November 27, 2022; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

How Long, O Lord?

The irony of Advent lections never fails to disappoint me in their hyper negativity! Every year as the new liturgical year interrupts the rhythm of Ordinary Time with a season of anticipatory excitement, the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love guiding our longing for the delight of Christmastide, filling us with the Yuletide spirit, yes, the hopes and dreams of all the years, all of it doused, thwarted, by texts that are full of gloom and doom, despair and agony, overflowing with apocalyptic overtures, overtones threatening us with dire warnings! The season of Advent reminds me of dinner during my childhood years, before the age of “NO,” whenever something disgusting was put on the menu. Eat your vegetables! Take for example the pungent olfactory smell of salmon croquettes frying in a pan, a nauseating southern tradition, pretending to be a delectable delicacy! This staple was particularly inedible, these hideously horrendous patties-out-of-can masquerading as cat food, the awful stench wafting in the air. Pick your worst! These images should speak volumes considering that everyone has just had some of their annual favorites at Thanksgiving! The four Sundays of Advent challenges our impatience, making us consume and digest a porridge of waiting and watching and not yet! Advent calls forth and demands God’s timing, Kairos time, ignoring, absolutely shunning, our calendars and clocks, the tick tock, tick tock of our obsessive Chronos time! These texts are the gruel we must

devour before we are allowed to gobble up our favorite seasonal dessert. I consider myself, hope myself to be, a disciplined, even stubbornly inflexible lectionary preacher, but sometimes it is hard, a tough call, when confronted with Bible verses like the ones the Lectionary often demands that we homiletically interpret. Yes, just like these we read today. Sometimes, I would rather go offline, wishing for kinder and gentler narratives! Frankly, some Sundays I would much rather preach from the mysterious “neglectionary!” After all, there is a whole lot of Bible we do not read during the three-year liturgical cycle of the Church Year! But honest preaching of the Bible does not choose favorites, allowing random picking and choosing, and that is the challenging gift the Lectionary offers! Honest preaching demands preaching all of it, even if doing so with integrity is a might challenging and a bit risky! We delude ourselves when we only select polite and happy texts, narratives that make us feel good and reinforce what we already think! Yes, I am sensitive to this mode of sermon preparation and delivery because I grew up on a steady diet of it, hearing the same things, the same stuff, over and over and over again! Not on my watch!

The further irony of today is that this morning’s lections do not even include the angry and depressing musings of John the Baptizer, yes, John T. Baptist, the Ebenezer Scrooge or if you prefer, the Grinch, who always manages to put a damper on our festivities with his rude, ill-mannered and uncouth, appearance in the Gospels. Hold on to your sandals! Untie the thong because his winnowing fork is on the horizon, right around the corner, his not-so-cameo appearance beginning next week to be exact! Warning Will Robinson! Warning! **I always wonder why we simply cannot just go ahead and skip to his cousin Jesus, the one of whom John prepares a way, but seriously, whether by accident or intent, misinterprets, misrepresents, the perceived coming Christ in every conceivable way imaginable, turning cousin Jesus into a stranger to many of us, a fed-up-mad-as-hell-I ain’t-gonna-take-it-any-more, vengeful, judging, angry, warring Messiah who has come to**

carve out an ounce of every sinner's flesh and deal in some unforgiving and ungracious retribution. After all, Jesus is really the star of the show, the one for whom we anxiously await! He is the main attraction, not the opening act! He is the duck, not the decoy! Just who is this curmudgeonly man, an imitation of John in every way, that this harbinger of disaster describes in not so flattering terms, this Messianic imposter merely masquerading as a peace monger? John's Jesus ain't no peace maker, ain't no Prince of Peace! He is not even remotely portrayed as Christ like! And sadly, that is the way some angry and judgmental contemporary Christians would like for him, who wish him, to be, even portraying him as a disgustingly vile and vitriolic judge, even unhinged and mentally deranged narcissist, despite opinions, overwhelming textual evidence, to the contrary, showing Jesus to be the exact opposite, the antithesis, of all we have come to know about the good rabbi. John's Jesus is an extreme polarity who sucks the frightened into the vortex of eternal judgment, weal and woe! **John's portrait does not even qualify as a poor caricature of the man from Nazareth, the rabbi whose lovingly gracious ways and means were clearly reflected, yes transparently revealed, in his mission and ministry, his preaching and teaching, fully illustrated at the depth of his very being. If this is Advent just go ahead and give me Christmas and put a cherry on top! But I digress; I often do!**

The Psalmist, a Psalm (13:1-3) in a lament attributed to king David, painfully asks a question for the ages, no doubt, real and rhetorical, "How long, O Lord?" I have asked that about my lingering COVID symptoms! How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes or I will sleep the sleep of death!" The prophet Habakkuk poignantly asks regarding his times and circumstances, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to

you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me! Strife and contention arise! So, the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails! The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.” And finally, as if you have not heard enough, the revelator named John, evidently isolated on the island of Patmos, composed his vision, graphically detailing and illustrating his apocalyptic narrative called the Book of Revelation, speaks for those who have unfortunately were exposed to the worst forms of suffering of Roman persecution, those “slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given,” crying ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?’” In John’s sobering mythic tale Christ literally rides in on a great white horse to rescue the faithful, this second coming alluded to in numerous narratives, including one of the most notable in today’s Witness from the Gospels as the liturgy of the Church Year now turns our attention to Matthew for the next year.

During my teenage years I had begun attending church once again, a restart that seemed like the umpteenth time. I was drawn to the steeple at the age of fifteen because that is where the girls were and where my new best friend for life was an active member. Might as well admit, name it, be honest about it! I had no visions of divine encounters, save those of a typical post-pubescent adolescent male! As a youth I was raised on an obsessively nonstop end time refrain, what amounted to “rapture” infused theological nonsense, a clear misinterpretation of the Bible. We were fed a steady diet of B or C-grade movies that depicted what were supposed to be joyously happy events but created scenes that looked more like those found in horror flicks, full of disaster, destruction, and devastation, like a barren moonscape after a hurricane or the landscape akin to a war zone. See Ukraine for perspective! There were car crashes, plane crashes, train

crashes, and other shockingly graphic situations. This was long before the fictional musings of Tim LaHaye and his fancifully fictional *Left Behind* series, yes right behind the rest! I could not resist! We were literally taught to imagine with glee John's depiction of Armageddon described in detail in the Book of Revelation, assured that the world's end was not only coming soon, but that it was about time, past time, all of us warmly comforted and reassured that this cataclysmic event was indeed a good and wonderful thing, a very good thing, the greatest thing, and not to be feared. We were told that we were the select few, that we would be spared the divinely inspired atrocities, that apocalypse was all part of God's lovingly gracious plan for humanity despite the fact that there would be significant collateral damage. Yes, there were who were unrepentant and brought this calamity upon themselves! They were to blame for their own demise! They were responsible because they had not been accountable! These unfortunate and stubborn souls would split hell wide open because they failed to believe. Yes, these unbelievers, the great unwashed, reprobates all, would be damned to eternal flames because they refused to drink the slanted, evangelistically conservative, one-sided theological point of view that many of us were coerced, manipulated, into buying this lopsided version because no other option was made available. Yes, I was one of them, hounded by my pastor until I prayed the pre-programmed prayer in the proverbial "public profession of faith," and consented to baptism by immersion, another my way or the highway practice in my denominational heritage.

Arguments raged between friendly factions as to whether these sudden and dramatic events would happen in what was argued among these end time zealots as an amillennial, premillennial, postmillennial, or dispensational world. I have just learned that I am a preterminist, as in preterminism, as in everything in the Bible, including apocalyptic theological prophecy, has already happened, is a record of history. I am also a "panmillennialist," believing that everything will pan out in the

end, just as it should! As I read again Matthew's musings, all placed in Jesus' mouth by the terrorized and tortured victims who were surviving Rome's onslaught, many of them mercifully martyred as their only escape, I recalled in particular one camp/youth song called "I Wish We'd All Been Ready, a memorable tune delightfully describing the scenes that today's Gospel writer offers in graphic detail. O happy day! The apocalyptic Matthean scribe reminds his faithful and frightened reader that "nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son." Only God knows! The writer then describes a series of scenarios in which one is taken and the other is, wait for it, left behind to his or her own devices, the transaction taking place in an instant. Matthew's sober advice was to "stay alert," yes, to be on your guard because no one knows. For those first century converts to Christ who were being subjected to the worst life had to offer it was good news, promising news, yes, once again, wait for it, hopeful news. Paul in Romans today declares that the faithful who attended this church located way to close to ground zero knew full well what time it was, that the hour was upon them to awaken from their slumber, to rise from their sleep, knowing that their redemption, their salvation was at hand. The evangelistic missionary apostle then tells them to cease all sinful activities and "dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ," as you await these magical, mystical, miraculous, things. Yes, how did that work out for them? You must remember that Paul, along with his constituents, believed that Jesus was practically already on the way back and thus the work of the faithful was done, complete, finished. They were wrong! **More than 2000 years later we should realize by now that this is not happening and that, about time, past time, that we go about the intensive work of saving God's creation, protecting this planet and every interconnected thing that lives on it. Don't drink the Kool Aid! Do not believe everything you read, even if it is in the Bible! Just because it is in the Bible does not make it so!** There is a difference between fact and fiction, what constitutes eternal truth and what is historically, temporally true! **It is contrary, counter-**

intuitive, to our experience and our understanding! The liberation of the early Church never happened, checks never cashed, promises never kept, never fulfilled, and all this material soon to become biblical, sacred writ, written in proverbial stone, forever! For us today, these images seem farfetched, nonsensical, demanding that we reinterpret these dire predictions in radically different ways to jive with our contemporary, twenty-first century, discoveries and understandings. We either do that or we avoid and ignore them altogether!

As we stand at the precipice of a new Church Year, once again beginning another serendipitously adventuresome journey following the life cycle of Jesus from the moment of his birth to his death, resurrection, and ascension, and the coming of the Christly Holy Spirit of God, we also stand at the precipice of a world at war, though it seems so far away from us, much closer to home a country petrified and horrified by gun violence—the recent gun violence fueling mass shootings, and throw in a brutally horrific mass stabbing for good measure, all these nightmarish killings filling the airways and the cemeteries—a world that is seemingly almost devoid, lacking in the deeply rich, the warm and fuzzy themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love that drive this reflective Advent season. So much reality has only coldly influenced the vulnerably compromised and the predisposed jaded among us, steeling in their minds those who have given in or given over, succumbing to the malaise of their apathetic indifference, ignorance, or absolute intentionally mindless arrogance. Our humanitarian crises have almost devolved into the proverbial blah, blah, blah, here we go again so get over it lack-of-compassion and conscience. Not to simplify the complexities of life and our current circumstances, but my thought, at least for all the faithful, those who claim Christ no matter their stripe, if we and they could somehow quit focusing, obsessing, on random events that will supposedly happen in the future, quit with all these futuristic speculations and

prognostications, and worry about the here and now and how we will somehow manage to pull together and take care of one another and make our global village more inhabitable, more livable. It is humanly possible! The here and now will take care of the now and later! The here and now will inform and impact, will change forever, the now and later! After all, those who are heavenly minded are usually of little earthly good! At least to a modicum of degree we would do well as a planet of people to find tangible ways to reflect the peaceable realm envisioned by the prophet Isaiah, the fulfillment of one whose naïvely penned hopes and dreams would go a long way to assuage our anxieties and fears, relieving us of so much of our self-inflicted misery. Listen with fresh ears to Isaiah's metaphorically hopeful prophecy for all people. "In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of the mountains! It will be lifted above the hills! Peoples will stream to it! Many nations will go and say, 'Come, let us go up to the Lord's Mountain, to the house of Jacob's God so that the Holy may teach us God's ways and we may walk in God's paths!' . . . God will judge between the nations and settle disputes of mighty nations! Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning hooks! Nation will not take up sword against nation! They will no longer learn how to make war! Come, house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" The cry of the faithful must be to quit hoping to be rescued and to do the very hard work, the justice, social justice labor, demanded by Jesus if we are to ever create peace and justice in our time, yes, social justice, a word that scares the living hell out of so many who claim more to be believers in Christ far more than followers of Jesus. This irony presents a most irrational, indefensible, and reprehensible disconnect, a dishonest dichotomy driving the motives, or lack thereof, of people called to do something, anything to help humanity but who seemed more concerned, even obsessed, about dogmatic doctrinal decrees and their creedal offspring. Yes, there is a difference, a big, huge, colossal, ginormous, difference! The Bible tells us so!

The writer of the second Psalm (1) asks another question for the ages, “Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?” It is a good question! I actually prefer the King James Version of the Bible regarding this verse, “Why do the heathen rage?” In some form or another it is a question that we seem to be asking daily as we consider our world, as we ponder the plights that swirl around us, surrounding us with a variety of mixed emotions, anger and frustration certainly adding to, fueling, our fears and anxieties. I will never forget the pianist in the first church I served as a Minister to Youth back in the early 80s. Can you picture it? Whenever this lost soul would offer a public prayer, when asked, a common practice in lower free church traditions, he would always pray that Jesus would hurry up and come back, return to take everybody home. His wife was an invalid and he wanted her to be set free, liberated from her suffering and misery. It was always very uncomfortable, even embarrassing, and I believe, sent mixed signals and bad theological overtones to impressionable minds. **The good news is that we are here and have been put here for a purpose, great or small, but never insignificant, called to be good and do good in the world, to make a difference no matter how great or small, no matter where we are. Yes, we long for the kind of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love that is associated with this special time of year, this holy Advent season, a spiritual uprising in the best way imaginable, but it will never come to fruition, it will never happen, if good people, people of all faiths, do not come together with these wonderful goals and objectives in mind and in hand. We cannot pray it into being! God has already conceived of such a peaceable realm, articulated from the earliest, from the creation stories in Genesis that mythologically describe human purpose and, sadly, the many ways we have gotten in our own way, the many ways we have disrupted and even destroyed God’s perfect plan, including our blatant and rampant abuse of a planet that should be safe and viable. Yes, the universe cries out in travail daily because it is being attacked and diminished daily. Yes,**

that includes climate change, but that is only a part of the picture, a fraction of what is oh so much more! We are all we have! We are all we've got! We are the solution to our myriad problems! If we truly long for an answer to the question for the ages, "How long, O Lord?", yes, discovering and embracing a lasting, permanently endowed and imbued Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, then indeed it begins with each and every one of us, each and every day. Yes, First Congregational United Church of Christ, just like the closing Fellowship Song sings! We lean into another Advent, hoping and praying that we do more than hoping and praying! After all, to follow Jesus always means to be busy about the business of living and spreading, sharing, the Gospel of Christ, doing for the least and the last, the most and the greatest, and everybody in between!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and comes to us continually even when we miss the signs or dismiss or ignore the Spirit's presence! Amen and amen.

