

The First Sunday in Advent, Year A

“For at an hour you do not expect,” Jesus says.

The day and hour about which we do not know comes to us in a thousand different ways. It comes to us as an unexpected gift, an unwanted loss, an unimagined future, a dream come true. Regardless, we had no way of knowing when, how, or if it would come. And we had no way of knowing what it would bring. Despite our best efforts to plan and prepare for the future, we live in the midst of uncertainty and the unknown. Some days and hours take us entirely by surprise, in good ways and in not so good ways.

The day and hour of uncertainty and not knowing are what Advent is about. Advent isn't just a season in the church year. It describes our life. The seasons of the Church year are a lens through which we see and reflect on our lives.

Advent, whether in the Church or in life, always begins with the day and hour about which we do not know. Nobody knows when, where, or how that day and hour will come. It is unexpected and unpredictable. It comes, Jesus says, like a thief in the night or a sweeping away flood.

Every year, the gospel for the First Sunday in Advent sounds ominous and threatening. We call texts like today's apocalyptic, and we tend to hear them as end of the world texts. That's often how it feels when life is uncertain, the future is unpredictable, and we are powerless to control what comes next. It can feel like the world is ending.

But in today's gospel, Jesus never says that the world is ending. Jesus is not predicting the end of the world. He is talking about how to live in the face of changes that are neither predictable nor controllable.

Uncertainty characterizes today's gospel. It begins with the day and hour about which we do not know and ends with the unexpected hour. And everything in between is about not knowing.

Jesus speaks about not knowing five times. We do not know the day, the part of the night, or the hour in which it – whatever it is – will happen. What we do know is that it – whatever it is – happens in the ordinariness of life: eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in the fields, and grinding at the mill.

And that makes me wonder if we have misunderstood what the apocalypse is really about. What if the apocalypse is not about some unknown day in the future but about today, and every day? Maybe every day is an apocalypse. Perhaps we are always living in apocalyptic times.

Look at the world today. Read the news. If there is a theme, it is uncertainty, not knowing, a feeling of chaos and powerlessness. So, what if the apocalypse is not about the end of the world, but about living in the midst of uncertainty and unknowing, with the unpredictability of the future, in the midst of chaos?

Apocalyptic days and hours are difficult ones. Life feels chaotic and out of control. We often don't know what to say, and sometimes we don't know what to pray. Questions abound, and answers are few and far

between. Explanations neither satisfy nor make sense. That day and hour are not so much about what is happening in our heads as about what is happening in our hearts, that deep place where the mystery of God and our own life meet.

The question then is not about the end of the world, but about how we live with uncertainty, not knowing, and powerlessness. What does faithfulness look like in those times? How do we live in the midst of impermanence? Where is our center on that day and hour?

The challenge of Advent, of that day and hour about which you do not know, is to cultivate what the poet John Keats called “**negative capability.**” Negative capability is the ability to sustain uncertainty, to live with not knowing, to stand in the mystery, to keep the questions and possibilities open, to embrace ambiguity, not to be too quick to resolve or shut down doubt – and to do all this without running away and trying to escape, without grasping for facts and reason, without blaming others and justifying ourselves.

I think that’s what Jesus is getting at when he says we are to “**stay awake**” and to “**be prepared.**”

Stay awake and be prepared for what? I wish I could tell you, but I cannot. I don’t know. It is the day and hour about which no one knows. The most I can say to you is to stay awake and be prepared for whatever comes to you, and what does not come to you. It is the unfolding of your life.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

These days and hours are unpredictable, unknown, and impermanent. That, however, does not diminish life. It intensifies life. It increases its value. It deepens its meaning. It opens us to the possibility of the impossible, to life and more life. Everything matters. And we don't want to miss a moment. **Amen.**