**Alert and Ready**

**Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44**

Looking back, sitting behind the pillar probably wasn’t the best choice. They arrived at the airport in plenty of time, checked their bags, went through security, and had a good half hour to go before boarding. But, as sometimes happens, their flight was delayed. Instead of departing at 7 a.m. as expected, the flight was now rescheduled for 9 a.m. They were both still a little hungry so they decided to grab a bite to eat at the restaurant directly across from the gate where their plane was scheduled to leave. What they did not know is that the airport speaker for their gate was broken. Because they were sitting behind the pillar, they also had no awareness that just behind them all their fellow passengers, alerted to the once again revised departure, were now beginning to board. It was after they finished their meal that my daughter and nephew stepped out from behind the pillar only to encounter the very curious site of a gate without people. They, of course, soon discovered that their flight had left without them.

In that moment it probably would have been little comfort to these two stranded travelers, but if Jesus were living in our day, they very well may have made it into the Gospel. Jesus often used stories like these to help people see a little more clearly the Good News Jesus is inviting us to embrace. In our lesson today Jesus uses two situations, not unlike that faced by Erica and Galen, to remind people about the necessity of staying alert and ready, if we are to participate in the Realm of God. For Jesus, The Realm of God is the vision of the prophet Isaiah who shares God’s Dream of a world of economic justice, peace and harmony for all creation and all people. The question then and now is how does such a world come into being, especially when the values of this Realm of God world are in conflict and tension with the world in which we actually live? It is such an idealistic sounding dream that many people just give up or at best become cynical, concluding nothing will ever be any different than the way it is.

It is in response to those who have given up on faith, given up on the power of God’s vision for us, given up on the church as a vehicle for change that Jesus says, let me tell you about the days of Noah, “people were eating, drinking, and giving in marriage, while all along Noah was building an ark, but then the doors of the ark closed, the flood came and it was too late to get on board.” Jesus says let me tell you about the home owner who had heard about the break-ins that had been occurring in his neighborhood. But, the home owner was busy with other things and went to bed at his regular time, while someone broke into his home, stole his i-pad, i-phone, laptop, dvd player, x-box and a new HD/LED TV. Jesus says, if the home owner new exactly what time his home was going to be broken into, he would have done something about it, but as it was he didn’t know, nor do we know when the opportunity will come to be part of God’s Dream for the world.

If Jesus had known about Galen and Erica, there is a good chance they would have made it into the Gospel. You never know when the floods will come, the crook will try to steal your stuff, the airline will reschedule your flight. “Therefore” says Jesus, “you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Biblical scholars debate about how best to interpret the Son of Man, but one thing is clear, the Son of Man is leading the way on the Realm of God’s vision for peace and justice in our world and if you wish to be part of that vision you have to be alert and ready.

In our Gospel today, Jesus is using the poetic language of eschatology. Eschatology essentially means the future always belongs to God and the Dream God has for our world. There is nothing we can do that will kill the dream, snuff it out, make it disappear. The poetic language of eschatology insists God never gives up, never relents on the promise of love and justice. This is why on the first Sunday of Advent our focus is oriented to the fulfillment of God’s dream in what is sometimes referred to as Christ’s second coming. “The Day of the Lord’s coming” is eschatological language, reminding us the future belongs to God and God alone.

The celebration of Holy Communion is an eschatological vision of the world of harmony, peace and justice, which Jesus calls the Realm of God. We eat the broken bread so that we might be fed by the one who was broken for us, but also so that we might share in the brokenness and healing of the world. We drink from the cup so that we might be nourished by the one whose love is poured out for us, but also so that we might in turn pour out our lives for the sake of one another, and the renewal of our world. Our calling, our mission as those following the way of Jesus is to be alert and ready so that we might participate in bringing this world of peace, justice and love into being.

Yet, being alert and ready is never an easy thing. Just ask the people of Noah’s day, who were eating, drinking and getting married, as the flood waters began to rise. Just ask the homeowner who lost all his electronic equipment, while he was sound asleep upstairs in his bedroom. Just ask my daughter Erica and my nephew Galen as they enjoyed a nice breakfast, while their plane was departing at the gate.

 Perhaps you saw the article about mall security written by Rueben Rosario and published in last Sunday’s St. Paul Pioneer Press. On November 4th of this year another lone gun man walked into one of the nation’s 109,500 malls, armed with an assault rifle. “He fired off six rounds at storefronts, signs and elevators as stunned shoppers and employees fled or ducked for cover….More than 250 law enforcement officers from 20 agencies in New Jersey rushed to the scene. Fortunately, no was injured and after many anxious hours the gunman was found dead in the basement with a one word note: “sorry”.

Following the incident one of the cops involved in the response to the shooter offered his candid assessment of how well the officers and those in charge had performed. Summarizing the article which the officer had penned, Rosario writes, “he was frustrated by an order in the midst of the active hunt, for all officers from his department to stop what they were doing and head to the command post to sign in. “That might have been well and good at some point,” the officers notes, ‘but it was contrary to our training and badly timed.’” “Then came more delays as they waited around for Command Post instructions.” Continuing his assessment the officer gets to the heart of the problem, “If you don’t give people a job that occupies their mind, it’s amazing how fast the level of alertness starts to drop…Pretty soon officers had their hands in their pockets, smokin’ and jokin’. The complacency was unbelievable, with civilians still inside the mall, the shooter still not found.”

Perhaps this is one of the major problems for too many Christians today and a danger for all of us at times. We come together at the command post, this place of worship, this house of fellowship, this gathering in the name of Jesus, but when it comes to living out our faith in our families, in our community, in our place of work we become complacent. It is one thing to sing about forgiveness in the command post, it is another thing to practice it in a real live situation with those who have hurt or offended us. It is one thing to hear a message about generosity and compassion; it is another thing to put it into practice, with how we spend our money, our time, our talent. It is one thing to talk about social inequities and racism, it is another thing to stand up and be counted when our voice and our action is needed.

Here is how the officer concludes his assessment of the complacent officers at the mall, “don’t stand around waiting for something to happen,’ he advised, “support the mission as best you can, but never hesitate to exercise individual initiative when necessary.” “Support the mission as best you can.” This sounds like advice that is very much in keeping with the One who tells us even today, “Be alert, be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Be alert be ready for the future belongs to God and the dream God has for us and for the world.

**Isaiah 2:1-5**
*The words of Isaiah were spoken 700 some years before the birth of Jesus, at a time when nations and empires were clashing and fighting for control. The prophet saw the devastating impact that the violence of empires had on the people and on the land. Yet, the prophet continues to believe that the power of God’s vision for the world will out last all empires and all acts of violence****.*** *The vision is now nearly 3000 years old and yet it continues to offer hope for how human beings might live in harmony with each other and with creation.*

The word that Isaiah son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.
O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

**Matthew 24:36-44**
*Both the final Sunday of the church year, which we celebrated last week, and the first Sunday of Advent we celebrate today use the poetic and dramatic language of eschatology to offer hope to people who see no little concrete reason for hope. Eschatology has to do with the future, but rather than be limited by the future that looks possible to us, eschatology lays its claim in the future made possible by God. In today’s Gospel Jesus is telling the disciple that because God continues offering new possibilities for the future, no one can pre-determine how, when and where that future will coming into being. If we hope to be part of God’s future than we must remain alert and ready.*

[Jesus said:]
"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."