

The New Normal  
11/27/2022  
Matthew 24:36-44

Something I've discovered in all my years is that, whether or not a person considers him-/herself a "history buff," everyone has that one event or period in history that they just cannot learn enough about. For my father, it's the assassination of JFK. For Carolyn Green, whom some of you may remember, it's the Civil War. For me, it's Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. That said, there's one book that I've read about but never actually read, and it surprises some people to hear this. That book is "The Diary of Anne Frank." It's one of those books that's been on my "books to buy and read" list for as long as I can remember, but I never think to ask for it for Christmas or my birthday. Well, as luck would have it, a couple of weeks ago, while I was waiting for Ruth to get done with dialysis, I was walking around Katie's and my personal "heaven on earth," i.e. Barnes and Noble. While I was perusing the shelves, not really intending to buy anything, my eyes happened upon a copy of this very book, and not in with the history books. Rather, it was in with the Bibles and other religious books. Without a moment's hesitation, I grabbed a copy and bought it. I then sat down to begin reading it, "Diary" in one hand, Peppermint Hot Chocolate from Starbucks in the other.

Now, for those of you who have not read it, there's a lot that you would expect to find in the diary of a 13-year-old girl. She talks about a boy she's crushing on and how she will marry him when she gets older. She talks about her fights with her mother and her sister, and how she just adores her father beyond reason. Given who she is and where she is, there are other entries in there as well that one might expect to find, like a passage where she lists off all the restrictions placed on Jews by the Nazis and Hitler. However, what I wasn't expecting to find as much of as I have is hope. She's 13, in hiding, knows full-well what Germans are doing to Jews, even describing "death marches" and "gas chambers." Yet, in spite of this, she is so filled with hope for the future that she rather frequently talks about what she *will* do when this is all over. Not what she *might* or *may* do, no; what she *will* do. So full of hope is she that this "new normal" will not last and that the next "new normal" will be even better that she boldly makes these definitive, future-tense statements. It is this very kind of hope, one that arises out of dissatisfaction with what is and pushes our eyes to what will be, that Jesus talks about in the reading for today.

This passage from Matthew, for this first Sunday of Advent, is admittedly a little out of place, or so it seems. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we would anticipate the reading would be predicting the first coming of Jesus, but in fact, it doesn't. Rather, it is a prediction of the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus here is fully grown, on the cusp of being turned over to the religious elite and crucified. However, his words serve as a warning for all who are in a Season of Advent, of anticipation and hope, including us. Just as the people were anxiously awaiting the arrival of a Savior that would save them from the powers that were in many a story for Advent, and just as those to whom he directly speaks are anxiously awaiting the coming of the Messiah at the end of days, so too are we in an Advent of our own. We look for signs that Jesus will come again soon, that the powers of Sin and Death will finally be defeated, that all shall be welcomed home at long last, that what presently is will be replaced with a "new

normal.” However, Jesus issues two warnings for the initial crowd and for us, for all who are awaiting the coming of the Savior.

Jesus’ first warning is in comparing the Coming of the Son with the Great Flood in Noah’s days. In those days, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Now, at first, these do not sound like major offenses. However, these people were eating, drinking, marrying, in excess. In other words, they were gluttonous, drunken, and self-serving. They are living what we might call “the lifestyle of the rich and famous,” one that is about amassing great wealth and seeking only one’s own satisfaction, even if it comes at the expense of others. They were hyper-focused on self-preservation, casting aside the needs of others and leaving the marginalized to starve, thirst, and die alone. So hyper-focused were they on the present that they did not hear Noah’s warnings, they did not know of the coming Flood until it was too late. Thus, Jesus warns against focusing too much on the present, on being overly concerned with the meeting of our needs and desires, and therein being unprepared for what is to come. However, Jesus is also quick to warn against the opposite as well.

Just as Jesus issues a warning to those who are too focused on self-preservation, too focused on the present, so too does Jesus issue a warning to those who are hyper-focused on the future. Time and again, he says that only the Father knows when the day, hour, moment will be. The Son, the angels, the other heavenly beings, do not know. Therefore, it is a fool’s errand to try and read the signs, to predict when the Son will come again. Additionally, the only reason we would have for wanting to know the exact day and hour would be to have a deadline by which time we clean up our acts and start looking for how best to serve our neighbors. Thus, again, this hyper-focus is for one’s self-preservation, this time of one’s soul rather than one’s body. However, in so doing, one misses out on opportunities to serve and love one’s neighbors in the present moment, to meet the needs of those who are in need right now.

Thus, Jesus gives us a “new normal” by which to structure and live our lives, one that is both in the moment and looking to the future in anxious anticipation. In this new normal, our eyes are ever on the future, anxiously anticipating the arrival of the Son at that unknowable day and time, ever-hopeful for the coming of the day when Sin and Death are no more and all will bask in God’s glory forever. Yet, at the same time, in this dissatisfaction for how things are and this hope for what will be, our spirits are stirred to make a difference here and now, to bring the coming Kingdom to fruition in the present. This is what Jesus means when he tells all who will hear to “be prepared.” In other words, he commands us, calls us even, to follow God’s commands, to walk humbly with God, and to love our neighbors in the present. All around us are neighbors in need, neighbors whose hope for change is the only thing that keeps them going. This is the Advent, the season of waiting, in which we find ourselves, serving those in need around us in the present that we might always be prepared for the arrival of a “new normal” when it does come. This is our “new normal” in and through Jesus Christ, and in this “new normal,” I have the hope of a 13-year-old girl. Won’t you join me in hoping?