



## *“Expecting the Unexpected”*

Sermons at Central Park United Methodist Church

The Rev. Mary A. Kelly

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*The holy season of Advent is upon us;  
are you awake, church?*

Jesus the Messiah is coming; are you prepared, O people of God?

Advent is a time for solemn preparation: for study, for fasting, for prayer.

We are not, as many would imagine, awaiting the dawn of a singular Christmas Day; instead, we're anticipating the coming of our Lord for all time, when the earth and the sky and every living thing will become one with the glory of God. According to

Matthew's gospel, the hour of our Lord's return will be unexpected. He writes, "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." (MT 24:43-44) Matthew makes it clear that not all people will be ready when Christ returns, but what does "being ready" or "keeping awake" really mean? A careful reading of the passages prior to and following Matthew 24 help us to discern the answer. Jesus describes chaos of every kind: persecutions, false prophets, wars and rumors of wars. (MT 24:6)

*The people are easily led astray, caught up in fear and willing to follow this one or that one down the road to ruin. "Then many will fall away,"* Jesus warns, "and they will betray one another and hate one another." (Mt. 24:10) "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (MT 24:13)

### *Will you be ready when the Christ returns?*

The return and reign of Jesus Christ is likely not what most of us has in mind when we trim our trees and shop for presents. To the extent that our consumer culture has influenced our religious practices, many good and faithful Christians have bought into the mythology surrounding the time of Advent, so that the importance of intense spiritual preparation has been overshadowed by the compulsive desire to manufacture "the perfect Christmas." The frenzy seems to intensify with each new year, so that neighbors are not "outdoing one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10) as St. Paul suggests, but are instead outdoing one another in outdoor light displays and competitive holiday baking shows.

This is not the Advent that the early Church Mothers and Fathers had in mind, when fasting and prayer were common practices, making Advent more akin to the Lenten season observances than anything we might recognize today. But if we truly desire to be ready for the coming of the Lord, then we must reclaim Advent for ourselves and for our families. Here are some initial ideas for contemporary people trying to be faithful in getting ready for Christ in the modern age of Advent:

*1. Let prayer be your first response.* Cut off in traffic? Pray for the driver in their need to get ahead. Angered by political commentary? Pray for our nations leaders, that they might be open to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. Feeling put out or put upon by the actions of another? Pray for forgiveness on both sides of the issue.

*2. Turn your Christmas decorating into a spiritual practice.* Add an Advent wreath to your kitchen table and light the candles at home each week to mark the passing of the days. Include the poor in your gift-giving; add five people to your greeting card list who are lonely and alone; bake an extra loaf of bread or cookies to give to an elderly neighbor.

*3. Make your shopping thoughtful.* Don't buy things that someone doesn't need, especially children; instead, prayerfully consider gifts that hold meaning. Remember that oftentimes the best give you can give someone is your time and attention. Encourage your children and grandchildren to comb through their closets and toy chests, selecting items to give away before accumulating more stuff. And while you're at it, do the same with your own stuff. And please, shop with dignity. Be kind to waiters and retail workers and fellow shoppers, especially when they don't get it exactly right. Never for a moment imagine that your needs supersede the needs and desires of others; instead, be humble. Be kind.

Remember that you are preparing for the Holy One to arrive, even at rush hour in heavy traffic.

*Reclaiming Advent as a time of spiritual focus* and renewal is counter-cultural, but you need not eliminate the things that bring you joy during the holiday season; on the contrary, spiritual devotions and practices during these days of commercial frenzy will enhance and deepen your understanding of what it means to be a lover of Jesus.

Do not be so overwhelmed by the commercial trappings of Christmas that you fail to expect the unexpected: the coming again of Christ Jesus. For on the day “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. 31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (MT 24:30~31)

*It is for this day that we prepare.  
It is for this time that we must make ready.*

Rev. Mary A. Kelly

