

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 27, 2022 – Advent 1
Matthew 24:36-44
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel Jesus gives his disciples a strong warning – keep awake because you don't know when the Lord will come, and you must be prepared! That's a consistent theme in Advent. Get ready! Use your time well! Focus on what is most important!

Every year when Advent begins and we read these lessons, I think of the words of the gospel song, "Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb." "Everybody's worried about that atom bomb. No one seems worried about the day my Lord will come. You'd better set your house in order, for he may be coming soon, and then he'll hit like an atom bomb when he comes." Not a song we're likely to be singing in the Episcopal Church, but the message is very like what we just heard from Jesus.

Growth in the spiritual life often involves two simultaneous processes, turning from whatever leads us away from God and turning toward God.

In the church Advent is a period of preparation for our yearly celebration of the birth of Jesus – a birth that changed everything for humanity – and for the Second Coming of Christ – when God's kingdom will be established forever. Pondering either of these events will lead us toward God. But of all the times in the secular year, the season leading up to Christmas may be the one when we are most tempted to lose our focus on God and on what is of ultimate importance. Advent has been appropriated by the secular world as a time to count down the days to "big gifts" with "little gifts" each day – chocolates, tea, wine, perfume, toys. We are bombarded with advertisements and special offers. We are tempted to measure love in terms of things given and received. We are drawn away from a focus on Jesus the Christ.

I would not want to suggest that we turn our backs on all our Christmas traditions. After all, many of them are ways we show love for one another, and love is good. What I would suggest is that during this month we "keep watch" over our thoughts and behaviors. Are they focused on God, on love, on hope, on light and joy? Have we lost balance in terms of how we spend our time and energy and other resources? Are we able to keep the Holy Family in Bethlehem in our hearts and minds or are we too distracted for that?

Since today is the beginning of a new year in the church, this may be a good time to set ourselves a spiritual "New Year's resolution." It is customary for Christians to mark the season of Advent by some special devotion or meditation. I would like to suggest two activities which may help a person turn toward God in this season and beyond.

My first suggestion is to write a spiritual autobiography. You may have already done this at some point in your life. If so, look at it again, update it, think, and pray about it. If not, or if it has been a long time since your last effort, give this spiritual exercise a try. Basically, a spiritual autobiography is an account of how God has acted in your life and how you have known God's presence in your life. You may start at any age that makes sense to you. Your spiritual autobiography may be a long narrative or just an outline of "bullet points." You may write your account in chronological order starting at the beginning or going back in time from the present. You may write this in any way that you choose. And if you want more guidance than this, there are several books and online resources that you may find helpful.

Each and every one of us has been touched by God. And we know it. But our memories may have faded over time. In a spiritual autobiography we write down how and when God has acted in our lives. In your life has God ever delivered you from affliction? Have you survived a life-threatening illness? Have you escaped from an abusive relationship or an oppressive job? Has your life ever been on a path of destruction when God turned you around? Has your future looked desperate even when healing and hope and joy were ahead? How has God already acted to save you? And where might you be now if God hadn't touched you, led you, and rescued you?

In a spiritual autobiography you may want to list the people through whom God has acted in your life. Who has helped you find God or journeyed with you toward God? What church communities have aided your spiritual growth? How has your love of God been expressed in your love of other people? How has God shown God's love for you through the love given to you by other people? How have you served God by serving others?

God is acting in our lives right now. Of course, our lives aren't as perfect as we might wish. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we do have problems, real problems. And we have a choice, a real choice, a choice that scripture teaches us is important to God. Will we complain about our problems, forgetting the wonderful ways that God has worked in our lives and continues to work? Or will we thank God from our hearts, remembering all that God has done for us and remembering that we are, by God's grace and gift, on our way to the Promised Land? Writing a spiritual autobiography can heighten our awareness of God and of what is most important in life.

My second suggestion for this season is to make a "Rule of Life," something you may know about already, something you may have done and already use in living faithfully day by day. There are many, many approaches to composing a rule of life. Today I want to share an approach that I learned from a book called "Protestant Spiritual Practices" by Joseph D. Driskill. His approach brings a fresh spirit to the practice.

We start by listing the things we do now or have done in the past to nurture and give life to our spirits. Many of these things will have nothing directly to do with church or "religious" activities. I hope that some will! Here is part of a list of examples from Driskill's book: caring for my garden, quiet time alone in the car, listening to music, taking time to look in my child's eyes, caring for a pet, taking time for friends, walking by the ocean, going to church, Bible study, praying with a special object, making an altar for my home, remembering friends who have offered spiritual and emotional support. This isn't a list of activities that are simply pleasurable, but activities that enliven and nurture our souls.

We use this list as a starting point for developing a rule of life. The idea is simple. Do what gives life to our spirit as much as we can and grow from there. If we find that we do very little to nourish our spirits, then we can do more, little by little. And we may decide to eliminate something from our lives that doesn't nourish our spirit to make room for something that does. It's a simple practice that may lead to profound results, for ourselves and for others.

The point of these and many other spiritual exercises can be summed up in the final words of that gospel song "Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb:" "Now don't get worried, just bear in mind, seek King Jesus and you shall find peace, happiness, and joy divine, with my Jesus in your mind." May we seek Jesus diligently this Advent season and may Jesus be in our minds in Advent, until he comes again, and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.