

Psalm 122  
Matthew 24:36-44

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Devon, Pennsylvania  
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First Sunday in Advent

## THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ARK

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 there were feasting 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 away. *Matthew 24:37-39a*

Advent is a necessary time for reflection and re-appraisal of where we are with our God.

For all our sophistication, the so-called “advances” of humankind daily look overrated for humanity as a whole. We can each devise our own litany of the human family’s ills and celebrations, and our lists will clump into pretty much of a sameness. But what’s missing on both sides of such a list is a generous measure of hope. What inhibits moral growth is the human factor itself, in the form of pervasive self-interest that gnaws away at real progress. Ambition that seeks personal gain is a cancer in the body of the whole; it sucks the nutrients out of the system that might benefit others, as we have seen on many levels in recent weeks. But ambition that seeks the nation’s and the world’s good get’s beyond the self, where it most needs to be. And that is precisely what our faith, at its best, seeks to do and become.

If the angst ridden events of the last few years tell us anything, it is that, to quote Stanley Hauerwas, “Disciples, like Noah, are to build an ark even if it is not raining.” The time to prepare for the worst is not when the cyclone hits. And if it’s not yet howling, it’s sure looking ominous hereabouts.

First, some background on the Noah story, which may strike you as an odd text for Advent and the coming of the Lord. The Noah flood story in the Genesis 6-9 is intended as a new-creation story that mirrors, in images, language and composition, the two earlier creation stories in Genesis 1-3. We know there was a universal flood some 12,000 years ago with the melting of the last great ice sheet. Noah’s story is based on primeval stories of such an event that all ancient Middle Eastern civilizations (the lands most naturally affected) passed on stories about. Noah’s story claims not to tell history, but as with all biblical narrative, to account for the presence of God in such an event. Here, then, God gives to fallen humanity a second chance at building a world fit for creatures who are, after all, made in the image of God. The ark becomes the instrument of God’s grace to continue life in an otherwise completely inhospitable environment. The story is a baptism and a resurrection story, a death (in the waters) and rising, rolled into one, of which there are at least nine in the Bible.

Why an ark? The first creation story began, you may recall, with the universe being formed out of an eternal expanse of water. Water, in the Bible, especially the seas and oceans, always represented the immensity, darkness and depth of chaos. God’s spirit brooding over this chaos, was all that existed before God brought order to bear in the universe and separated the sky, sea and land, and marked their bounds. Noah’s story tells of the return of watery chaos. An ark, then, is the refuge for the remnant.

Those of you who can turn to see the back windows, may discern a ship’s anchor in one of the central panels. An anchor was one of the most cherished symbols in the early church. Christians represented the often beleaguered church as a ship plowing through a vast ocean, its occupants in a chaotic world, save for their trust in God. The anchor, with its crossed arms, represented their faith as the only thing that tethered them to the bedrock of God. So important was this image of the ship that, to this day, the body of the church has been known as “the nave,” from the Latin *navis*, “ship.” So, too, the pulpit (from *pulpitum*) was a small raised platform on the bow of the ship from which the best lookout could be made of the way ahead. It was also the word for a scaffold or gallows, from which . . . but let’s not go there.

An ark, then, is a place of refuge in a storm, a sanctuary—not to escape from the world but a sanctuary, a place of temporary retreat in which to prepare to meet the needs of the world; a place from which to create a new world.

Our times demand a genius and resolve that the world cannot give. The world has, in many respects, given of its best and, as in Noah’s day, its has come up short. Now, we are faced with issues on a global scale that feel like Noah’s rising tide, and the trillions of dollars that we plan to invest in holding back the rising waters have no certainty of success. We have sailed our Ship of State in perilous waters while sending the lookout below deck. The world looks to us, who made and exported our ideology—materialism, technology, *creative* finance, ecological blindness, globalization, etc.—to

show leadership in fixing those problems which, like a rising sea, know no national boundaries. We have, in the twinkling of an eye, discovered the appalling fragility of the systems we have chosen to live by.

I'm not about to claim that the worldwide "Church," as it stands universally, is the answer. God knows the church has too often been its own worst enemy. As I've said many times, we must discern between the often imperiled frailty of our religious institutions and the person of Jesus. So I challenge each of us who has taken the faith pledge to be part of our Christian family, or simply to explore our worship and good fellowship, to seriously come to terms with the teachings and leadership of our God. No institution survives simply because it's a nice place to hang out. The church has survived century by century because a dedicated core have discovered the real, unshakeable presence of a living God who wants, quite simply to be let in.

What does all this mean for our Advent season? First of all, for us to make a new-creation difference, there have to be some ground rules.

Noah embarked on a journey "in faith," that is, not knowing but trusting God as to where he was ultimately going. His answer was not a set of truth statements; his answer was the journey. That's why we call this enterprise—faith. If we insist on having quick answers, nothing much is likely to take root in us because our merely cognitive side has very little topsoil. Mere information seldom takes ownership *in trust* (the heart of religion) in the soul, but dies on the vine. Beginning a new creation means a willingness to abandon our preconceptions about God, few of which come from actual experience—like judging someone because their dress or demeanor or idiosyncrasies alienate you. Discovering the truth about them, meanwhile, demolishes one's abstractions. Getting beyond preconceptions means beginning a daily conversation with God-in-Christ, who is more likely to give signs, as on a journey, rather than stock answers. So, read a few verses of a gospel each day. Read them slowly, very slowly, like chewing and savoring a fine wine. God will not disappoint the genuine seeker, but if we set the agenda we will disappoint ourselves, like imagining the contours of an unfamiliar journey ahead of time. And throughout the process, be open to new discernment, especially that which overturns one's former notions. God's ways are not our ways.

What is proposed here is not a feel good enterprise, like starting a new diet or work-out plan. We have a God whose one great hope is to change the world by changing ourselves. Let me offer a personal illustration of the power of God to change a fearful situation.

I had been assigned as a Cruise Director to the Cunard Line's newest cruise ship, the Ambassador. We left our fitting out in Rotterdam on a shakedown cruise, the maiden voyage of a brand new ship. The passengers, however, were of a particular caste least suited to this type of cruise. They were all British! Predictably, the worst things happened. Some rooms were unfinished, carpet was still being laid, and the crew, understandably didn't yet have that familiarity with a new ship that makes it run like a Rolex. We left the island of Madeira too early to enjoy the splendid night life, and in the Azores all the taxis were on strike, and it was a hot two mile walk into the city. Later, in the dead still and heat of the Sargasso Sea (the doldrums in mid-Atlantic), the air conditioning went on the fritz for thirty-six hours. But the *piece de resistance* on an all British ship, was that while still two days from Antigua in the Caribbean—we ran out of tea! By the time we reached our final port, San Juan, Puerto Rico, the consensus was that the British Empire had hit its all time low.

The passengers were to be taken to the El San Juan Hotel, and from there by bus to the waiting charter planes, where we'd wave a fond—"Don't let the door handle hit you in the rear"—farewell. The first group left, and the remaining 350 gathered with their luggage in the great ballroom. Then came the shattering news that their charter plane was delayed 24 hours in Lisbon because of mechanical problems. And guess who had the task of breaking the news to these happy campers.

I was a recently committed and very inexperienced new Christian, and I needed to pray. I needed resources to face this very angry, very large group on my own, yet not on my own. So I went into the men's room, the only place I could find with some privacy, and behind a closed door found a place of unaccustomed sanctuary, and knelt to pray. I felt a need to communicate to these angry people a peace that was not of myself.

Five minutes later I took the microphone from the stage, and standing on their level on the ballroom floor, broke the news. As though a bomb had detonated in their midst the passengers surged towards me full of wrath and fur. But then, as if touched *en masse* their anger suddenly, miraculously dissipated like buckshot hitting water. It was as if some common electrode had stunned them into submission. It was the most extraordinary answer to a prayer.

When, in the midst of storm-tossed days, we invite Christ into our frail craft, there is promised, by our invitation, the most beneficent presence to see us through the storm and, like Noah, to build a new thing.

Amen.