

1 Advent A: Matthew 24:36-44, Romans 13:11-14

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on December 2, 2007, by Pastor David Van Kley

### **The Beginning, the Middle, and the End**

Years ago, when I lived in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, I did a lot of cross country skiing, mostly on groomed loop trails. I think of the "blue trail," which looped along a lake near our house. I'd often ski there during my lunch hour, circling the trail several times. I can see it all in my mind: the long, slow descent to start, during which you could work up a rhythm—kick/glide, kick/glide, kick/glide. The short, steep climb past a big white pine. A long, gradual ascent. Finally, the fast downhill with the sweeping turn back to the start.

This loop wasn't especially challenging. In fact, I could practically ski it in my sleep. Which was fine! I enjoyed the sound of my skies on the snow, the lovely woods around me, the surge of endorphins you get from exercise. Often, I'd just lose myself in my thoughts. I loved it.

Sometimes, we think of **life** this way, as a loop trail. Now that Thanksgiving is past, winter sets in. Come April, spring will burst into bloom. In July, we will bask in warm sunshine. In October, the aspens turn gold and drop their leaves. Every year, we celebrate Gold Discovery Days. The Rally. The Round-Up. March Madness. The circle of life goes round and round.

A lot of the time, it's not especially challenging, which is fine. We come to enjoy the rhythm of it. We can almost do it in our sleep. Now, we put up Christmas lights. In the spring, we rake needles and plant flowers. In summer, we take vacations. If we don't get all the chores done one day, they'll still be there tomorrow. If the Cubs don't win the pennant this year, there's always next year. And next year. **And** next year! Life goes on, seemingly forever.

But then, something happens to remind us that well, life isn't **just** a loop. We see pictures of ourselves twenty years ago and realize that we've changed: we've grown up, grown gray, grown bald. We attend the funeral of someone whose presence we have treasured, and realize, painfully, that they won't be there anymore. That "time waits for no one." Life is like the coils of wire you sometimes see along the top of a rancher's barbed wire fence: the wire is looped, but it also moves forward.

It is this forward motion that causes most of life's tension. Mention to me that there are only 22 shopping days left before Christmas and my blood pressure rises. Because I haven't bought anything for anyone yet and I can sense the time ticking away.

Today's Scripture lessons insist that history has a beginning, a middle, and an end. At the beginning, stands the Creator God. Somewhere in the middle came the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At the end, Christ will come again to bring God's plan to its fulfillment.

This Word creates anxiety! That's why some people spend so much time trying to figure out the details. They hold "end-times seminars," mining the book of Revelation and other Bible passages for "clues" as to the date and time of the end. Wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, eclipses, and comets are cited to "prove" these theories.

The gospel lesson warns against this. "**No one** knows the day nor the hour." Not the angels in heaven, not even **Jesus himself**. The one thing we **can** know for sure is it will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. A thief doesn't send email: wait up for me at 2:35 AM! The Bible is not an itinerary, complete with Christ's arrival time. No one can pinpoint the time, the date, even the era. How many times haven't starry-eyed believers sold all their possessions to stand on mountaintops with faces upturned, waiting for an end that doesn't come?

Still, for most of us, I suspect another sin is more dangerous. Not the sin of **predicting** the end, but the sin of **ignoring** it. We are very skeptical about the second coming of Jesus. After all, 730,000 days have passed since he said he would come again soon. How soon is **soon**? Perhaps, as a Native American joked, "God is on Indian time." So we grow complacent. We act as if life was a familiar loop and history will go forever.

These texts sharply counter our complacency: one day there will be no tomorrow! The alarm will ring. The trumpet will sound. Christ will burst through the atmosphere like an asteroid or show up in a village in Nicaragua and that will be that. And when the end comes, it will come as a terrible judgment upon those who figured it never would.

I don't like to proclaim that Word any more than you like to hear it. But there's no sugar-coating this pill! By it, God holds us accountable. We have only so much time to hear and believe and act. And we don't know exactly **how** much.

Still, if this Word stokes our fears, it also glitters with promise. When you think about it, would you **want** history to go on forever? To confess Christ without confessing that he will come again would be like watching a movie with no ending or enduring a pregnancy that never results in a child! Surely, history must be headed somewhere!

If we know the Christ who came at Bethlehem, we know where it's headed. He came to bring healing and hope. Not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him! To confront evil and marinate the world in love. Christ will return to complete what he started and fulfill the promise of the child born to Mary. So Paul writes in the second lesson: "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." This is **good** news! Christmas brought us Christ; the end of history means **more** Christ.

The key thing is knowing Christ now. As Paul says, "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light....Let us **put on Christ**."

When you were a kid, did you ever take a football, throw it to yourself, run for all your worth and dive into an imaginary end zone, whispering: “Minnesota touchdown by Adrian Peterson?” Did you ever **put on** a plastic firefighter hat or wear a doctor’s stethoscope, acting the part of the person you hoped someday to become?

Arlene talks about growing up with 8 sisters in Demotte, Indiana. They’d play “house,” outlining rooms and hallways with dirty laundry on the basement floor. One got to be the Mommy and tell the other kids what to do. Everyone wanted that part! Someone had to be the Daddy, who went to work each morning, came home for dinner, and then left for evening meetings. Nobody wanted that part! Funny what kids learn from their folks!

The Post girls even played Church! They’d line up on the floor like worshippers in a pew, while Pastor Mary handed out the peppermints from her “altar,” a card table, and said, “Take it beloved,” just like Pastor Rosendahl.

You smile! But there is a serious side to child’s play. There isn’t a child on earth who doesn’t want to be grown-up before her or his time. Children “image their future,” to borrow a phrase from psychology. They push, impatiently, at the limits of their age. They try on the roles they will one day assume.

This is how Paul wants **us** to live, leaning into the future God has promised. Pushing against our limits as fallen human beings. Living now what we one day will become. Putting on Christ because eventually, Christ will be all in all.

Which means beating swords into plowshares now—fashioning spears into pruning hooks now—because Christ will come again as prince of peace.

Which means drying the eyes of those who weep now because in the last day every tear shall be wiped away.

Which means treating people of every race and clan, every gender and nationality justly now because on the last day, people will come from east and from the west.

Which means planting trees and managing forests now because one day the earth will be a garden.

Which means caring for prisoners now because one day they will be set free.

Which means telling the story now because one day all will believe it.

So we are to live in Advent. So we are to make ready for the coming of the One who is with us now, Jesus Christ, our Lord. So we are to put on Christ. Amen.