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Holy Thief, stealing away our false securities and idle vanity: awaken us from the dull sleep that clings to empty fear and vacant routine; unfold on us the time of crisis when love of truth floods a thirsty world; through Jesus Christ, the one who is to come. Amen.

A Collect for Proper 28A, Prayers for an Inclusive Church, page 1

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44 (Advent 1A)

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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 24:36-44

Jesus said to the disciples, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 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 they were eating 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 all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: 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."

I'm thinking about those directional maps in public places that sometimes, very helpfully, have a large dot or X and "You Are Here" on the map where it is placed – obviously, to get us oriented both on the map and in the space. I'm also remembering that on some occasions I have encountered those large maps in strange places without the dot or X or any indication on the map as to where I am looking at it – and found the map as confusing and

unhelpful as the space I'm attempting to visit – sort of adding insult to injury. The map says, in effect, *someone* understands this area, too bad you don't....

Advent can be a bit like that second map.

The descriptions we have – the maps – are vast and mysterious, depicting our world and worlds beyond our world, the vastness of time and space, all of God's realm, all time, each moment and all

moments present in God.

But these Advent maps often actually conceal what they are attempting to express because there is, sometimes intentionally, no effort to say where we are in the scheme.

Or, since there are so many references to time in speaking of Advent, it may be like the image of a clock with no hands – or the ever-unhelpful unset digital clock flashing 12:00....

What's the point?

We can quickly see that reality in which we are living is vast, increasingly described by cosmologists and scientists – though they point out the more questions they answer, the more that arise. We helpfully describe the eternal realms as “mystery” – not to discourage scientific exploration and incisive description – but to reach beyond all limits as God is, inherent in God's self, that sort of freedom, that boundlessness in relation to time and space that do, in many experiences, constrict us and discourage us.

So how is this Advent season with its themes of waiting, awakening, and hope of value to us, to St. Mark's, to our neighborhood and the world?

As we do with our map apps on our phones or computers, we can drop a pin on this Advent map – in fact, much of Advent practice is exactly that.

The Advent wreath and the Advent calendar are very much about getting to the point.

In the reading from Matthew, strange as it sounds, Jesus not only points to eternal mystery, he also says where we are, what we are to do.

He begins with the confounding: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” And he adds a range of images that, like parables, tease our brains, unsettle us.

Non sequitur that it seems, Jesus concludes: “Therefore you also must be ready....”

Thinking of Jesus speaking of the thief in the night and images from the collect we prayed together at the beginning of the service: what gets stolen is not something from our house, but the “Holy Thief” steals, our “false securities” and “idle vanity”... our fake news sense that we know all we need to know and that we control all that is around us.

God's moment, God's place is now and here.

The Advent calendar slows us down to say, “*today.*” You have today and the gift that today brings.... not racing ahead to another time and other gifts... not even Christmas with its gifts.

Today may be more wonderful than Christmas.

The candles on the Advent

wreath burn in an immediate moment, one at a time – not all at once until it is that time. Today, one candle.... Now. Here.

“Keep awake” is not to awaken to some vague spiritual sense – it is to be alive and attentive to all of reality that is now happening and all of reality is now happening.

Our “dull sleep,” “empty fear.” and “vacant routine” have only become more dull, more empty, more vacant in this age of the non-stop media stream that suggests, untruthfully, that we are doing something when we have the television running in the background constantly with the drivel of talking heads that often intentionally mislead, the “news alerts” that pop up on our various devices to urgently grasp our attention with something that we don’t need to know, and which is likely untrue. Social media glues our eyes to screens erasing the immediate experience of actual life that is unfolding in the creation and among the people that accompany us day by day, moment by moment – true and vital expressions of the totality of God – ignored.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans we heard: “You know what time it is,” (do we?) and since Paul doesn’t really think we do, he tells us: “how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” And as we focus our sleepy eyes on the map he says: “For salvation is nearer to us now than

when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

It is not “Castro is gone, Trump is near.”

It is now.

And the hope is not in the comings and goings of certain people or structures around us; the medium is *not* the message as we were warned by Marshall McLuhan from Toronto in 1964. And having fallen into the trap of the medium (or media), the urgency and utter simplicity of contemplative prayer and meaningful religious practice – even gathering, as we do in Advent, for a brief, daily time of prayer such as Compline – becomes essential to actually being alive and experiencing real-time vibrancy.

The hope is recognizing not a distant possibility, not something superficial, but an immediate and profound actuality. We need not wait a moment to “lay aside the works of darkness” or “put on the armor of light” or to “live honorably” as Paul urges – all of this we can do moment by moment – this moment... and this one....

The idea of beating swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks; of nation not lifting up sword against nation, of not learning war any more – as we heard in the reading from Isaiah is not intended as a future theory but as attainable both immediately here and now and also globally at any time....

We neither serve ourselves nor others well by thinking this is all about an undefined future that is parked on God's desk until God gets around to it. God has made it *our* business, *our* work, *our* joy right now.... *everyone's* business, work and joy right now... not exclusive to any religion, national or tribal identity....

Again, from the collect: It is a thirsty world – especially in the midst of more lies than ever – yet love of truth – the truth of love – is flooding us, here and now, the whole world in our day, in our time.

Are we awake, alert, ready for now, for here?

Advent hope is not distant and dependent on someone or something else.

The night is far gone, the day is near – walk in the light of God.

Drop a pin, set your location, and be the life of God.

You are here. We are all here.

What you do, what we do today is the future.



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