# **SUNDAY SERMON**

# Called to be Fully Human

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 24, verses 36 to 44.

Jesus said to his disciples, "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."

In the name of the Son of Man, the firstborn of the children of God. Amen.

Someone said to me last Sunday in the Common, "You know the readings and hymns today seemed especially relevant, given what's going on in the world. Did you plan that on purpose?" I think this person mainly had the election in mind, but maybe also the general unrest and divisiveness we're feeling in our country and around the world. The sense that something's not right, that we've lost our footing, and that a change had better come soon.

I reassured this person that we did not, in fact, pick out last Sunday's readings to reflect what's going on in the world around us. Last Sunday was Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the church year. And the church year always ends this way: with God's people gathering to proclaim that, despite appearances to the contrary, Jesus is lord; King of Kings and Lord of Lords in fact, and that as God's people, we pledge ourselves to the values of God's Kingdom first, no matter what.

The end of each church year, and the beginning of the next one, always have an apocalyptic flavor to them. We get several Sundays in a row of disturbing messages: keep awake! Keep your eyes open! Because a change is coming. The old world can't keep going on this way: there's too much injustice, too much greed. The strong dominate the weak. The rich exploit the poor. But get ready, people of God, because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour!

If this is not the peace and comfort and sweetness and light that you were hoping to find by coming to church this holiday weekend—well, I suppose that's the irony of Advent. Going to church in Advent is not about peace and quiet. The way I learned it growing up, Advent is a meditation on the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Serious stuff, I know. If you want cattle gently lowing and angels singing lullabies, you'll have to wait for Christmas.

In the meantime, there's a suffering world out there, and Jesus has come—and is coming—to do something about it. This is how C. S. Lewis puts it in his book Mere Christianity: "Enemy-occupied territory—that's what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage."

Continued



### **DATE**

The First Sunday of Advent Sun., Nov. 27, 2016

#### **PREACHER**

The Rev. Jason Cox

## **READINGS**

Isaiah 2:1-5 Psalm 122 Romans 13:11-14 Matthew 24:36-44



I think what my friend in the Common was talking about last Sunday is that, suddenly, maybe for the first time in a long time, many of us feel out of step with our own country, like we're living in enemy-occupied territory. And this is just how Jesus and his first-century followers felt: they were actually living in enemy-occupied territory, in occupied Jerusalem, slave to the world dominating power of Rome. Jesus' revolutionary act of defiance was to say out loud that the Caesar of Rome was not the real king: God was the real king. To pray for God's kingdom to come on earth was then, and is now, an inherently political act.

Now please don't take this the wrong way: when C. S. Lewis said "enemy-occupied territory," he was not talking about any particular contemporary political leader being the enemy, and neither am I. Lewis meant that our world is corrupt and filled with evil, that human beings are susceptible to evil, and sometimes it seems that evil has the upper hand.

But our king is the King of Love. Compassion is the central value of his kingdom. And compassion is the most important tool at our disposal in the great campaign of sabotage that we are being called to take part in. Whenever we see a failure of compassion out there, we're called to get involved and do whatever is in our power to correct it. Right under the cover of our normal, everyday lives, we are to use the compassion that God has planted in us: to uphold a neighbor in need, to deflect a stereotype, to silence a bully, to help reveal the humanity of our sisters and brothers who are targeted for being "different"— humanity that some people would rather not see.

The thing is, if you can't see the humanity in another person, then you are the one failing to act like a human being. What is it that makes us human, anyway? Jesus uses an unusual phrase to describe himself in the Gospel today: "Therefore you also must be ready," he says, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." The Son of Man. In the whole of the New Testament, Jesus never calls himself the Son of God. Other people call him that, sure, but the title he chooses for himself is this obscure phrase, Son of Man. He uses it all the time. What does he mean by it?

It isn't just a convoluted way of referring to himself—Jesus also uses the word "I" lots of times. He could have just said "I am coming at an unexpected hour," but he didn't. When we call him "Son of God," we're insisting on his divinity—he isn't like us! We're saying. He's good—but he's God; and we're not, so we're off the hook. But when Jesus calls himself "the Son of Man" I think he's saying: I am like you. I am, in fact, the Human Being—the fully realized evolution of what it means to be human, of what human beings are capable of.

Biblical scholar and theologian Walter Wink makes a strong case for this understanding of the phrase "Son of Man" in his 2001 book "The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man." Wink argues that Jesus borrowed this phrase from the prophet Ezekiel precisely because it reveals how divinity and humanity are connected and intertwined. In the first chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet has a mystical vision of God revealed as an exalted human being who he calls "the Man." And "the Man" then refers to Ezekiel through the rest of the book as "Son of Man." Ezekiel was of the priestly class, and in the years that followed his prophecy, the temple priests drew on this vision of God and wrote a new prologue for the book of Genesis, crystallizing the Jewish understanding of creation.

And this is what they wrote: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle . . .' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

What is that makes us human? We are human because we bear the image of God. No human being is excluded from this heritage. The text itself makes clear that God's image is not confined to men only, but encompasses all genders. And as Genesis goes on, we learn that God's image is shared by all the people of the earth, whether they are Jewish or not. All people, all classes, all creeds, all colors: all of us share God's image. And to dishonor any human being is to desecrate God's image, to spit in the face of God— and perhaps even worse, for our own soul anyway, to turn away from our own humanity.

But here is some good news this Advent: we have come to a place this morning where our humanity can be restored. This church is a place of restoration, of healing and reconciliation. Every time we are fed at this altar, we become Christ's body and we are strengthened for the work God is calling us to. This is where we learn how to become fully human— by following the example of the Son of Man, the most human one of all. We see the fullness of his humanity in the love and compassion he has for all people. And his love and compassion are enough to keep us safe.

But it's not enough just to keep ourselves safe. This church is not meant to be a place to escape the world. It's meant to be a place where we plot how to change the world. There are others who are hungry for this food. And they need to hear this good news too.

There's a world of scared and lonely people out there right now, people who are longing for what we've got in here. Take them something from this table, and let them know that there's shelter in here, and community, and that we're always looking for new people to join us in God's great work of compassion and love.

Amen.