

Advent 1C, Matthew 24.36-44

November 30, 2025

The Rev. Scott Walters

If you got up this morning and read the entire gospel of Matthew, you probably have questions. I did not start my day that way. But I have questions. A big one being, What happened to the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount? Remember him back in chapters five and six? The guy who said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own." Some of us found his teachings convincing, even if we can be lousy at living them out on many days.

But on the first Sunday of Advent, liturgical New Year's Day for Christians, we don't get the Don't Worry Jesus, do we? We get Apocalyptic Jesus, who seems to be saying, "The problem with you faithless people is that you're just not worried enough." Some branches of the Christian Church lean especially hard into that bit about two walking in a field, and one being taken, and two others grinding meal together, but only one is taken. So many books and movies and summer camp skits meant to scare us into being ready when the Rapture occurs.

We'll come back to that. But I want to start with the assumption that Jesus does not want you to be more afraid. What he wants is for us to be more awake. It's just that he wants us to be awake, not to the world as we wish it was, but to the world as it is.

Recently I read a book by Jonathan Rauch titled *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy*. Rauch is a journalist and scholar at the Brookings Institution who also happens to be a gay Jewish atheist. I mention these last three aspects of his person, because Christians have been known to persecute gay people, Jews, and atheists quite brutally at times. This fact makes it all the more remarkable that Jonathan Rauch calls Christianity a "load bearing wall" for liberal democracy in America. He doesn't think this particular democracy, at least, can stay standing without citizens who practice several of Christianity's essential values. And he doesn't think they're the kind of values secular people just stumble into on their own.

What are those values? Well, for these, Rauch turns to a Catholic theologian named James Alison, who happens to be a favorite of mine. So, in addition to all his impressive smartness, Jonathan Rauch also has exquisite theological taste. Anyway, James Alison boils the essence of Jesus's way into these three tenets: Don't be afraid. Imitate me (Jesus, that is). And forgive each other, because that's how you'll be forgiven. These are essential practices for living out the great commandment to Love God and to love our neighbor.

Now, there are a couple of reasons I wanted to bring these into conversation with our gospel reading for today. I need to say first that the purpose of Christianity is not the

salvation of liberal democracy. Although I, for one, am pretty fond of it, so I do hope we can be of help. But whether you agree with Jonathan Rauch or not, it's interesting that someone outside the Church is saying that when the Church of Jesus gets its priorities straight, it matters profoundly to the people around it. A non-Christian is saying his country needs Christians to be better Christians. It needs people who are less fearful, who try to respond to the world like Jesus would, and who practice forgiveness.

One problem with reading Jesus's more apocalyptic teachings, like today's gospel, as calls to be more afraid, is that this can lead to a hunkered down approach to Christianity. We try to keep ourselves separate from the world so we'll be pure when Jesus returns or we barricade ourselves from the world so we'll survive when it collapses. But this is why I was hoping you read the first 23 chapters of Matthew with your morning coffee. Hunkering down in fear and worry, staying pure and righteous and separate, these are the ways of life Jesus kept calling us out of, over and over again in his ministry, are they not? In fact, if we keep reading into Matthew 25, Jesus says that when the Son of Man comes in glory, what he wants to catch us in the act of doing is the opposite of hunkered religion. He wants us to be giving away food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, not stocking up provisions for our own survival. He wants us to be welcoming strangers into our lives, not keeping them out of our bunkers at all costs. He wants us to be clothing the naked, tending to the sick, visiting prisoners. In other words, he wants to find us imitating him, loving this world like he loved this world. And we just can't love in that openhearted way when fear is our prime motivator, can we?

Which may mean that when Jesus says we need to stay awake and be ready, he's not taking back what he said on that mountain about considering the lilies and not worrying about tomorrow. In fact, do you think he might be saying the very same thing? "Don't be afraid," he tells us, "even when the world gets scary, which it will. I need you to be awake to the moment you're actually inhabiting and to the people in your world who most need healing and love and forgiveness. Stay awake. Right now. Don't turn away from them and go to sleep. And don't let fear and worry about what might happen tomorrow pull you out of the life God is giving you to live well today."

There was just one thing I knew I wanted from my father's fabulously cluttered office in his college professor days. It's a yellowed 3X5 notecard he'd clipped to the lampshade on his desk. The perimeter had been traced with a thick black Magic Marker and straight edge, to frame a reminder he'd written to himself in all caps: AS NOW, SO THEN. As a boy, when I asked him what it meant, he said, "Well, it just means that the person you want to be tomorrow is going to be the result of how you live today." Part of my 10-year-old brain thought this meant I was going to have to learn how to shoot a proper left-handed layup if I was ever going to make it to the NBA. But even then, I knew the wisdom was about something deeper down in the self. I even think part of me knew it meant that the only moment we really ever have to become the self that Jesus is calling and loving and inviting us to be is the moment we're in right now.

There were times when I got the message from the Church that what would finally set my life straight was to become scared enough of Hell or filled with enough guilt and shame for the sinful thoughts that were sending me there. But the reason I still have Dad's little reminder on the bookshelf in my office is that, even as a child, I didn't really believe I needed to be more frightened of the world, or frightened of God, or even frightened of myself to live a better life. And I didn't really believe the main reason I needed to shape up was so Jesus wouldn't be quite so angry with me when he returns. Even then, I think I sensed that AS NOW, SO THEN was an invitation to be awake to my life in the present. To be awake to it when it's painful and uncertain. To be awake to it when it's shimmering with grace and with joy.

It would make sense that when the chaos is great, when change seems to be coming like rising floodwaters in the days of Noah, when fear is being used by the powerful yet again as a means of control, Jesus might have to use his outside voice to get our attention. But what he's yelling to us over the clamor is, "Keep awake!" not "Be afraid!"

Don't be afraid. Imitate Jesus. Forgive, just as we've been forgiven. This is the life Jesus invites us ... the life he occasionally begs us ... to wake up to. This is the way of love we can start living today. It turns out that the life we'd want to be caught living if the Son of Man did return tomorrow is same the abundant life he calls us to in every moment of every day. And the moment we're given to respond to his call back to our lives is always right now.