

“That Day and Hour” / Matthew 24:36-44 / 1 December 2013

“But about that day and hour,” Jesus says in this strange apocalyptic reading from the Gospel of Matthew, “about that day and hour no one knows. The Son of Man will come like a thief in the night.” Happy Advent season. Let these weeks leading up to Christmas be for you a season of longing, a time when you sit still with your desires, a period when you allow yourself to dream of things that ought to be, for that is the purpose of Advent. If we fail to set aside seasons for longing, then we will forever agree to the tired old world that is. But listen, out on the margins of our world today, out on the furthest reaches of your life, a new song is heard. Its strength is growing, soft and clear. A new light is appearing. If no one knows about that day and hour, as Jesus says, then surely it is because the day is always today, and the hour is always now.

On the far side of New Castle, in those gray borderlands where the world becomes flatter and the Midwest truly begins, there is a convent called Villa Maria. It's the mother house for an order of nuns known as the Sisters of the Humility of Mary. The nuns have opened their beautiful facility to outside groups for conferences and retreats, and the ladies of Bower Hill Church have had their annual women's retreat up there; they know what a beautiful place the convent is. If you're a follower of urban legends, then you know about the countryside around the convent. As a child, I lived briefly in that somber countryside where Pennsylvania bleeds into Ohio. Even then, I thought it was a spooky sort of place. Derelict farms lay fallow, and old industrial sites sit vacant. Strip mines, and ramshackle towns all run together in a hauntingly eerie landscape of weed-choked lots and patchy woods. Yes, as a kid, I thought it was an eerie place; it's no wonder some of the scariest urban legends in this region center around that area: the Green Man, Zombie Land, Murder Swamp, the Bridge People. The flat farmland just west of New Castle and just east of Youngstown is a land of creepy myths, and true crimes, and unsolved mysteries. Criminals in both adjacent cities find it a handy place to dispose of evidence, so there are frequently gruesome finds out there in the gray weeds.

Villa Maria sits in the midst of all those strange vine-strangled places that I heard about as a kid. But even in the dead of November, the convent is an oasis of beauty and order, a place of broad, sweeping lawns, and elegant shrines and statues—Jesus, and Joseph, but mostly Mary. The convent is a sacred place. You feel it as soon as you set foot upon the grounds. No one is in a hurry there. All the faces you see are patient, and calm, and open. The space itself, with its gardens and park-like landscape, has a certain restful psychology to it. The space causes you to remember there's more to life than deadlines, and morning commutes, and computer screens under fluorescent lights. The space speaks of a mystery at the heart of life, one that we can embrace, one that can transform our living if we will seek it.

Now, for a very long time, I've talked about taking an annual planning retreat in order to come up with sermon and worship plans a year in advance. I've talked about it forever, but the week before last is the first time I've ever actually done it. I must confess, though, that my talk never would have come to anything if not for my wife. Michelle wanted me to go with her to an event that the nuns were hosting called an “enneagram retreat.” The enneagram, as you may know, is a theory of personality types based the ancient philosophies of the Desert Fathers. To make a long story short, there are nine basic personality types; I'm a five, which surprises exactly no one who has studied the enneagram. Another non-surprise was the fact that there were only three men at the retreat, including myself, and each of them had been brought by his wife. But as interesting as the enneagram turned out to be, it wasn't the most important part of the retreat for me. The most important part was simply being in a beautiful space, a place without television, a place where I was left alone with the worship calendar, and the Scriptural texts for 2014, and the task of imagining. The most important part for me was the physical and emotional space that the convent afforded me; it was a good space from which to imagine the future of this place. I got more planning done during my three days there than I could have accomplished during a week at the office.

It's necessary at times to step outside your daily routine to catch your breath. There are

possibilities in this life full of years that you will never notice, paths that you will never follow, if you do not give yourself the emotional space to see them. This Advent season is a time apart, when you are invited to step back and reassess. Come aside to see your life and our world—all the same old stuff—in a new and better light.

“But about that day and hour,” Jesus says, “no one knows.” It's a strange day indeed when you hear apocalyptic rhetoric here at Bower Hill Church. Whenever the Sunday morning Scripture reading is about cataclysmic destruction, and worldwide catastrophe, ruination and the end of days, it can only mean that Christmas is just around the corner. The first Sunday in Advent always begins with the apocalyptic words of Jesus, for now as then we are waiting for Christ's appearance in our lives, our homes, our thinking, and our acting, and our doing. But when Jesus first spoke these frightening words, he was talking to people whose hopes and dreams had been crushed by a powerful empire, people on the margins of the world, dominated by forces beyond their control. The whole genre of apocalyptic literature has pretty much disappeared from the modern literary scene, but it was once quite common. Apocalyptic writings are almost always produced by marginalized people, desperate people who see no hope other than some great, catastrophic divine intervention, with lots of vengeance to boot. And yet, these texts about the end of times reflect that universal human longing for what is not, what ought to be. People from Jesus' times to our own have always yearned for distant hopes that don't even seem possible in the world such as it is. Still, we are dreaming. We are hoping. But unlike the desperate people of Jesus' day, we do not need to look to some far-off apocalyptic scenario for our salvation, for the day is always today, and the hour is always now.

The guest preacher was wandering around town looking for the post office, so he asked directions of a small boy, who showed him the way. As the preacher took his leave of the child, he said, “Come to church tonight. I'll be telling folks how to get to heaven.” The boy replied, “Thanks, but no thanks. You expect me to believe that you know your way to heaven when you can't even find the post office?” Our expectations sometimes cause us to give up on faith. The “Left Behind” series and a lot of well-known politicians have touted the apocalyptic approach to the Christian faith. But Jesus is not talking about anything all that mysterious in the Gospel of Matthew. He is demanding sweeping change, not just for yourself and not just for the afterlife, but also for this world, also for today. All Christ asks is the same thing that every other worthwhile cause asks of you, which is pretty much everything: your time, your energies, your passions, and your love. There must be a change in your life and in our world. If you were to give it a moment's thought, as the Advent season calls you to do, then you would realize that you already know exactly what it is that needs to change. And you know, as you have always known, that the time for change is now.

Life's days and hours go streaming past in a seemingly endless parade of near sameness. The great monotonous march of days is broken only by the occasional vacation, up to the mountains or down to the beach. Our days and hours are punctuated by holidays, or illnesses, weddings, baptisms, funerals. But otherwise, they do not vary all that much. The days can seem so much alike, we forget that they are each one of them precious. We forget that they do not last. One of the main reasons for having seasons like Advent—indeed one of the main purposes of church altogether—is in order to set aside seasons in your life. Our busy lives are so packed with stuff that our TVs told us was important, stuff that our society prescribed for us, stuff we took upon ourselves without giving it much thought. But Advent comes to remind us that not all things can be rushed. We must set aside time not just for the kids' soccer games and swim lessons, not just for the committee meetings and the shopping, but we must set aside time to dwell with our old, old hopes for a better self, for a better world. The day is today and the hour is now.

“About that day and hour, no one knows.” There's a never-ending tension in the life of faith. One day, we'll tell you to be grateful; be content. But contented people rarely change the world. The next day we'll tell you to be mad as a Viking about the world as it is. Your life of faith will move between these two poles: joy and passion, rest and work, worship and service. But when will you be

devoted to which one of them? Well, that might just be the part that no one knows. Today at least is Advent, a time to give yourself to hope. Amen.