

**Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Divine**

**Newgate Street**

**St. John's, Antigua**

**The First Sunday of Advent (A)**

**December 1, 2019**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**DRAFT**

**“Uh, oh”**

**The Holy Gospel according to**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

But of that day and hour no one knows,  
not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son,  
but the Father only. As were the days of

Noah, 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 when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have

watched 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 hour you do not expect.

Dear Lord, help us to keep ready for the coming of your kingdom and to join in Your Movement, for in you we live and move and have our being. Amen.

The late famous Roman Catholic storyteller and priest, Andrew Greeley, several years ago told this far fetched yarn:

<https://www.agreeley.com/hom10/nov28.htm>

“Once upon a time there were two eighth grade girls, Lois and Ella Mae, who were both sensational volleyball players. Lois was the captain of the team and the best player on the team. Ella Mae was co-captain and the second best player on the team. They were also “best friends” and were together all the time even when they weren’t playing volleyball. Ella Mae didn’t mind being second best and Lois didn’t think being best was all that big a deal. There was one difference between

them, however, and I bet you know what it is. I wouldn't want to say that Lois was lazy exactly, but she was just a bit deficient in the work ethic area, know what I mean? Ella Mae on the other hand was almost compulsively committed to practice--hardest working player in the whole school, including the boy athletes. Lois used to tell herself – and everyone else who would listen to her – that Ella Mae had to work hard because she didn't quite have all the talent at a co-captain ought to have.

“WELL, the team won their section and their division, and their region. They were really good: Lois was the best spiker in the city and Ella Mae never gave up on what looked like a lost point. Finally they came to the city championship against their traditional rivals, St. Adelbert. Ella Mae wanted to practice every day the week before. Lois said two days was enough. After all, there was more to being in eighth grade than volleyball. You know what happened? Sure you do. They lost to St A by one point because they were just a little bit out of condition. Don’t cry, Ellie, Lois said to her friend in the local ice cream

store where they were eating pink pistachio peppermint ice cream. We'll have lots of championship games in high school. BUT, Ella Mae sobbed, we'll never have an eighth grade championship game again."

That's one of those fanciful stories Andrew Greeley liked to tell.

Almost sixty years ago, my family and I were staying in a motel in Daytona Beach, Florida, where we had stayed before many times. We loved the place--

Daytona has enormously wide white sandy beaches sometimes a hundred or more feet from the water to the sandy rise above which all the cottages and condos and motels are situated. We woke up one morning to find that a four foot tidal wave had come up during the night, without any warning, and the big wave had washed away many thing stored on the beach, life guard stations, cabanas, beach chairs, sand shovels, all those things were washed askew or washed away. I am not even sure the local news that day had more than a brief comment about it. As a small kid I had walked on that beach at night maybe a

hundred times trying to catch crabs or trying not to step on them in the pitch dark where one could not see one's hand in front of one's face; beaches can be very dark there. And I thought briefly, what if I had been walking down there on that beautiful wide beach at night and the water suddenly rose four feet with no warning.

Apocalyptic stories are that way: no or not much warning, the end comes, bang, and the writer asks or tells us to 'be ready'.

My mind runs to the year 1973,  
February 1, or thereabouts. At 6:30 am in  
the morning my dorm phone when I was a  
student at Harvard Business School rang,  
and a voice on the other side of the phone  
was that of my parents' friend, the  
Presbyterian minister of Fountain City  
Presbyterian Church. His was not the  
voice of a person I would expect would be  
calling me, especially not at 6:30 am on a  
February morning in 1973. He said, "your  
parent's home caught on fire very early  
this morning and your father is dead.  
Your mother was pulled out, and we don't  
know if she will live or not. The house

was totally destroyed, and the two cars in the car port exploded. Can you come down here to Knoxville now?

The only person in my entire extended family who had ever died before that was my maternal grandfather when I was sixteen. All my other grand parents, school friends, brothers, were living normal full lives; no one had ever died except my maternal grandfather.

The long and short of my true story was that as I came into the hospital hallway at St. Mary's Hospital where I had been born, way down the hall I could see my mother sitting up in bed and smiling. She

lived many decades longer. By December she had rebuilt her house, and now I own it. It's sort of a keepsake to remind my family that out of the ashes, by the grace of God, my mother lived a long healthy life and we may, too.

On September 11, 2001, on a day with a gloriously bright blue sky in Manhattan where my wife and I lived, two giant 767 airplanes careened into the two World Trade Towers about four miles south of our apartment, and within two hours more than two thousand four hundred workers in those two buildings were dead as were

about 450 firefighters, police, and EMS workers who had come down there to the southern tip of Manhattan to try to save lives; those 450 who perished actually saved almost exactly 450 workers in those two one hundred ten story buildings. I became a chaplain to about 20 of the injured survivors, and after that I have served as a disaster chaplain with the Episcopal Church and the Red Cross. I have been present with the New York medical examiner on two occasions when families were notified of the deaths of their loved ones, one in a crash of the Staten Island Ferry and another who had

been flung off by a construction crane on about the eleventh floor of a building under construction about four blocks from my back door.

I understand what people go through when a loved one suddenly passes.

I am not sure I 'signed up' for an 'exciting life', but somehow that has been what has happened. Sudden events are what they are, but rarely are we prepared for them.

When I was sixteen I had watched a program on our black and white television set about how to resuscitate unconscious people. Less than a week later there was a loud screech and a bang, and a horrendous scream from a lady down the street, and I knew that it probably wasn't a dog that had been it in our very hilly neighborhood. I ran outside down our long front yard to the street where I saw my younger brother lying face up in the ditch beside the road. He had been hit by a pickup truck as he rode his bike perpendicularly down the neighbor's steep driveway and across the road, but he did not make it across the

street before being struck. I could see he was not breathing, that his head had a big gash in it, and that he was completely still. Almost instinctively I crouched beside him and breathed into his mouth and sort of ‘blew him up like a balloon’, and my little brother began to breath again. Later he would play high school football and would become an outstanding family dentist—he had saved all of his baby teeth when they had come out. A couple years ago he received a double lung transplant and is now living comfortably with his wife, all his sons and their wives and six

grandchildren. His walking is slowly improving after the lung transplants.

Rarely are we really prepared for these traumatic events in our lives, and I pray you will be spared most if not all such events. Somehow God saw I was somehow prepared for unimaginable events in my life, and I was able to more than cope.

Lois and Ella Mae were quite capable volleyball players in their eighth grade class in school. But near the end of the

season they convinced one another to just coast the last few days before the big game.

We may not know when our big game will happen. It could be today or tomorrow, or at some later date. But Christ sees that the lives of us humans is but a few breaths long. May we use the breath we have to bring others to know the wonders and miracles that we Christians experience every day and every year, and not to lose heart, but to be ready for whatever may come to us; I believe God prepares us, that God doesn't 'throw us to

the wolves', but in God's ever-loving arms we survive and help others to survive in whatever form that may take. But keep ready to help others find Christ.

Amen.

Description: Christ calls us to be ready.

Tags: Flood, planes, 2001, disaster,  
volleyball, prepare, resuscitation, brother,  
grandfather, mother, father, crane, ferry,  
beach, sand, wash, rise, death, emergency,  
breath, breathe, Red Cross, Rotary

And here's another sermon, one from 2016:

I was watching a fascinating story on television this past week on the Science Channel about the discoveries geologists are making by using satellites to make detailed maps of the entire earth's surface. Many intriguing novel images were shown. One was a discovery of multiple side by side mysterious downward spirals each about a hundred or so feet in diameter carefully carved and stone lined in the deserts of Peru that apparently had been made by a clever prehistoric culture

to use wind currents to move water for irrigation from a natural underground reservoirs at the bottom of the spirals over to their crop growing fields. Another investigation was a discovery of the mysterious pits that are dug all over certain deserted parts of Oklahoma apparently to find the buried treasure of various and sundry gold rush era bank robbers. A news story of the time told about a very famous bank robber who was caught burying his ill-gained wealth in such a pit.

But a final work of that interesting and informative television presentation was

focused on Hainan Island at the southern coast of China where our satellites have shown that the Chinese completed in late 2016 building a vast underground facility possibly for their nuclear submarines which are based nearby to protect them from any enemy blasts from incoming ICBMs, intercontinental ballistic missile rockets. Apparently, if any world nuclear power can protect its offensive nuclear weaponry sufficiently, it shifts the military balance of power in its favor. This and other mysterious subterranean facilities numbering in the hundreds have also been prepared throughout the Chinese

mainland. The television commentator left us listeners hanging in suspense by saying that indeed if these subterranean facilities were hardened military facilities, the balance of nuclear power in the world was already changed. Satellite cameras cannot discern what is inside a tunnel. That was a chilling comment, to say the least. China is now the second largest nuclear power in the world, ahead of Russia but just behind the United States and rapidly closing. It is not just the numbers of nuclear weapons that matter but the number which can be protected from an attack, permitting a country to

launch a successful counterattack, or to launch a first strike attack, with follow up. Most current military strategies assume there will be no nuclear counter attack because of the extensive damage of a first attack, but the vigorous tunneling efforts of China are quickly changing this scenario as we speak.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hainan>

And Wikipedia notes that “A number of small islands, which are located hundreds of kilometers to the south, are claimed and administrated as part of Hainan Province”—these are the so called ‘disputed South China Sea islands’. So at

the very least the Chinese defense of these islands is being greatly beefed up by the Chinese military.

Sorry to bring us out of the lethargy of Thanksgiving dinner so abruptly!

Now having survived Black Friday, when we can't cite the exact statistics of the number who lost their health or their lives during the mad dash at store openings on Black Friday at midnight, we have these rather disturbing images coming from our Gospel lesson for today where we heard, (quote) "before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when

Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away.”

And (quote) “Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left.” (end quote)

I happen to be in the generation of the Big Bomb, where every so often we would hide under our sixth grade classroom desks in the 1950’s in case some evil power decided to bomb the uranium nuclear enrichment plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, less than twenty miles as the crow flies from my home. Jet fighters

were constantly scrambling and breaking the sound barrier over our heads, showing someone how we would defend against an incursion into our sovereign territory. And a few people we knew then had fully stocked basement bomb shelters, now pretty much a thing of the past. That might have been a practical thing to do in tornado alley in the Midwest, but in the hills and valleys of Tennessee it was probably a big of a waste of money, to say the least. The use of ‘The Bomb’ never materialized. But we were “ready.”

However, a wood and metal sixth grade desk would not be really that protective

against a hydrogen bomb, but I suppose our under-the-desk exercise was done to give some comfort to someone in our educational hierarchy that made them feel they had at least ‘done something’ to protect their elementary school children. What it did do however probably was to make my generation pretty much immune to any talk of ‘end times’ or ‘last days.’ It was all a bit of a bad joke, which no one really admitted it to us. So my generation is rather blasé about End of the World scenarios. Maybe your generation is also. Maybe we all have been lulled into complacency, I don’t know.

Occasionally as a member of the Rotary Club which has led international efforts to try to eradicate polio from our planet, I see a note coming across my computer screen about the resurgence of polio in Syria, a country racked by war and civil strife for years now, and reports of new polio cases in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the last three countries in the world with active polio transmission. One note showed a picture of a US polio victim who is still in an “iron lung,” one of those dreaded devices that kept many children alive during that awful plague, and that machine still is the only solution for a few

seventy year olds today to keep them breathing after suffering from that dread polio disease. At any time polio could become virulent worldwide again. We also hear the name “Ebola virus” mentioned and of a brigadier general who was reprimanded this week for not properly containing the Army’s stash of anthrax. And furthermore we hear first this food and then that food is now being genetically modified and going into our diets, and in the recesses of our mind it causes us a bit of concern. But generally, we are simply not ready--not ready for The Bomb; not ready for “The Virus”; not

ready for The War, not ready for The End. In a nutshell, we are relatively “unready” people. A few of us have or are supposed to have “Go Bags” packed with some necessities, our medications and the like, but most of us are not really ready for anything much different from what we experienced yesterday, and last week, and last year, and so on. It just seems to take too much energy to be ready for much of anything “different” in our lives—maybe it’s just the burden of concern left over from the gaping hole our national economy experienced a few years back. If we ‘dodged the bullet’ of the big recession

and happened to be the lucky ones whose job didn't just suddenly disappear, we are now breathing a collective sigh of relief. Others happened to have a nice or good enough 'nest egg,' or maybe we were old enough to take 'early retirement' and not have to look frantically for the next job opening, a job which may or may not be out there for us anywhere. But we tend to move to our lowest state of readiness for anything new pretty quickly after a storm has past, either a hurricane or an economic collapse. Complacency is something we can get lulled into easily, isn't it?

So right here today we are back “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,” and life is beginning to look up as some ‘official’ unemployment statistics continue to look up. Isn’t it a bit like hearing a lullaby, and we just get lethargic, and we are indeed not really prepared for much of anything very traumatic. That state of mind is probably emotionally protective for us, not feeling we may have to face any big obstacle for a while, maybe a long while, we hope.

But Christ is calling us to something that is more than an everyday occurrence, something that takes top priority in our

Christian lives just when others are letting their guards down. Maybe Noah's Flood is a good reminder for us to be ready spiritually, to keep our families and neighbors ready spiritually, to keep as much of our world as possible ready spiritually, in tune with God's Son.

Time and history are in God's hands. Human history has a goal; human history will have an end; and that God will be present and ruling at the end of human history, just as God was at the beginning of human history. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of time.

God who created the heavens and the earth in the first place, who created the evolutionary cycles and processes over billions of years, will be the same God who is working at the end of history.

As the spiritual says, “The whole world’s in his hands.” Time is in God’s hands. History is in God’s hands. God is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. God is the bookends of time and history.

So the important question is this: how are we to live today? We are to live our lives as if Jesus Christ were coming back today. We are to take stock of our spiritual lives and

spread our religious wings and help others get ready. The time is always short for us humans, with very few making it up to or past a hundred. So we can subtract our age from seventy or eighty or ninety or a hundred twenty and see about how long maximally we have left to bring Christ's kingdom to one more person this week, this month, this year. We are all Christ has to work with in our part of town, in our part of the state, in our part of the world. How we stay awake to the opportunities God gives us to be a productive part of the Jesus Movement is what matters.

Amen.

