

A sermon preached by the Reverend Timothy M. Ervolina, on the first Sunday of Advent, 2 December 2 2007,
at St. Martin's in the Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, SC
Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 24:36-44

From Now On

It was all a little embarrassing you see. Their father's crazy obsession with building, this, this—whatever it was. And people lived along time then, so when they went crazy, they had a lot of years to rant. And boy could their father rant.

He could rant about the elders, and he could rant about the bandits and he could rant about the village women with their painted lips and the men they led astray. He could rant about the rich and he could rant about the poor. But mostly he ranted that the gods weren't even real. Which, when he'd get on that rant, was most embarrassing of all.

He'd come home, in the early years, smelling like fresh-cut cedar, his long beard sprouting little curls of planed wood that fell out as he laughed. They would go up with him, on that flat plateau that looked out over the valley, snaked with great brown rivers and watch as he'd go over to the edge and just stand there talking up to the sky. And sometimes—well, sometimes it seemed that the sky really did answer him.

They were a pretty ordinary family, by the standards of the day. Noah, his wife and their three sons. Shem, the eldest, who looked like a younger version of his father, held himself tall and proud. Ham, the middle son, had about him a darkness, even when he smiled. And Japheth, the youngest, was kind and loving, and could make you laugh no matter how tired or sad or worried you were. But they were also lonely, these boys.

It was hard to make friends with the other young men in village, when all of the parents believed that your father was a dangerous man with a dangerous dream—to undermine the foundations of their society: the family, the tilling of the earth, the worship of the ancient ones who lived atop the mountains and brought the blessings of the harvest.

And then there were the Nephilim, their strange and terrible beauty seducing many a young woman who followed them into secret forests or beneath the waters of the diamond sea. Shem told his brothers how he came upon a Nephilim, drawing a young girl from the neighboring village into the

twilight, where he knew she'd never return. And so he found his wife, as his brothers finally found theirs and the family grew to eight.

Except to trade Noah's finely hewn planks for food from the south or silks from the east, they worked along with their father, a family of refugees in their own country, choosing each other over the rest of the world. Of course most people thought the world was not such a bad place, if you didn't count the Nephilim, or the bandits, or the people in the great cities where, it was said, a man would slice your throat over a bit of copper or an iron flint. Most people, however, did not live in the cities, they lived in little villages, and they spent their long lives in a rhythm of birth, marriage, and death, humming a melody of harvest and planting, feasting and waiting to feast.

They didn't think much about the reasons that things were the way they were, they just sleepwalked through the centuries. And when Noah traveled around, in the early years, to tell them that that he could talk to the God who was above all gods, and that this God was going to bring a flood if they didn't wake up and fight the Nephilim and cleanse the cities and do justice, they shook their heads. Nobody had ever heard of justice. Nobody had ever heard of a God that was above all the other gods. And nobody had ever heard of a flood.

Every once in a while the young men from the valley would slip through the cedar stands to watch the giant structure take shape. They'd go back home and tell their friends and everyone would laugh about Noah and his whatever it was. And the years passed. Fifty, sixty, ninety years. The young men of the valley grew up and took their own wives, and had their own young men. And finally, in the one hundred and twentieth year after he started felling logs and nailing nails, Noah stopped. He walked to the edge of the plateau and looked down at the valley below.

"How long until the flood, now, Father?" asked his sons.

"I don't know," said old Noah, his six hundred year-old beard, finally starting to turn white. "I don't know, but we'll be ready."

And so they began to gather together all the animals on the earth, the lizards and the birds, the cats and the dogs, the mice and the monkeys, the frogs, cows and elephants. And two by two they led them up the long plank into

Noah's wondrous and waterproof building. And it was only a few days later that it started to rain.

Down in the valley, people thought the rain was pretty strange, and some of them thought about what Noah had said, but there were weddings to plan and crops to plant and wine to drink. They went to bed that night, and they never woke up.

That's the story that Jesus asks his disciples to remember, right after he tells them that he has no idea when the world will end. He knows that the iridescent dome of the Temple will come crashing down within a generation. He knows that they will be martyred for telling the world about a new kind of kingdom that rules from within the human heart. He knows that there will be wars, earthquakes, plagues and, yes, floods. He knows all those things will happen, because they always have, and pretty regularly at that. But he has no earthly idea of when the sky will crack, the sea will run away, the beginning and the end will fold in upon each other, and the Son of Man will return.

They couldn't have missed his metaphor, his use of the term Son of Man. They knew that it was prophetic code from the Book of Daniel for the One who would be Messiah. They believed he was the One. But they were darn puzzled that he couldn't even figure out when he was supposed to take over the world.

That's why Jesus tells them to watch out, stay awake, be alert. The Son of Man is coming when you least expect it and if you're not careful, you're going to be out harvesting grapes or grinding barley and—bam!—there goes the universe. Or at least your little corner of it. And you just might miss the coming of the Son of Man.

A few days after Jesus told the disciples about the mysterious advent of the Son of Man, he stood staring into the angry face of the High Priest Caiaphas. The religious lawyers had paraded a whole regiment of witnesses before the court who couldn't even begin to get their stories straight about what he had said and what he had done. Finally, in frustration, Caiaphas shouted, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

And quietly Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

From now on. And nobody even knew the day or the hour. From now on. And nobody was even awake. From now on. And nobody even knew that the thief had broken in and stolen the world back from the one who stole it from God. We stand on this first day of the Christian year, awaiting not a babe in a manger, but the Son of Man whose Advent is on the clouds of heaven, and whose rule is in the hearts of those who live by love.

The end of the world industry makes billions selling prophecies of cataclysm. There’s nothing you can do, they will tell you. The glaciers are melting. There are too many poor in the world, there are too many dying of AIDS or malaria or tuberculosis. There are too many nuclear swords, too many chemical and biological spears. There are too many dictators and fascists and people with strange beliefs who want to kill you because you don’t believe what they do.

But there is something we can do. We start by recognizing the One who has seated at the right hand of Power and come on the clouds of heaven. He has given us work to do, including the need to stay awake and not give up whether in fear or fatigue. He has shown us that we can do something about injustice. That we can not just feed the poor, but change the systems that bind them into systems that free them from hopeless poverty. That we can find treatments and cures that restore health to even the sickest.

We often think that Advent is a time of quiet waiting, but it is more than that. It is a time of expectancy, a time of knowledge, a time for building the great Ark in which the world can safely ride out the coming flood. Advent is a time for doing, not just waiting.

Listen, says St. Paul, don’t you know what time it is? Can’t you hear the alarm clock going off on the nightstand? Are you just going to sleep through the coming of the Lord? From now on, salvation is here. From now on, we are in the last days. From now on, we’ve got plowshares to make from swords and pruning hooks to make from spears. From now on we’ve got neighbors to love, a law to fulfill.

Because after the deluge, after the earthquakes, plagues and wars, on the day that wasn’t on anybody’s calendar, it turns out that the end of the world is

really only a beginning of a new world, where nobody learns war any more. Where there are no laws other than the law of love. Where the thief in the night turns out to be the Son of Man. And he's here, beloved, he's here, from now on. Amen.