

Peace in a Dark Place

December 1, 2019

Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Doug Barlett]

If you're like me sometimes the only prayer that makes sense after watching the news (or listening or whatever) is "Your Kingdom come like it is already in Heaven. Your kingdom come on Earth." And in Matthew's history of Jesus and His teaching the disciples had apparently asked the question that we all want to ask which is, "Ok, Your Kingdom come. Yeah, but when?"

And this is on page 806 if you want to follow along. Jesus is talking and he says, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, or the Son, but only the father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (That's Jesus talking about himself.) For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day no end of the ark, 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; and one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; and one will be taken in 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 must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Now if that didn't make perfect sense on 1st reading you are in luck because Scott is going to answer all your questions about that passage. [audience laughter]

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I usually like to manage expectations a little better than that.

How many of you show of hands here have had a discussion in the past 2 weeks about the appropriate date to start playing Christmas music? Ok, I see a lot of hands in the room. In my house there's a bit of a disagreement about this. One of us thinks that we should wait and at

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the earliest start playing Christmas music on the way home from Thanksgiving dinner. And the rest of us are wrong. [audience laughter] So everybody has their own rules. What rules do you have for Christmas observance, Christmas music? Before Thanksgiving or no? No? I'm with you. Obviously on the one who's right. [audience laughter]

What about Christmas movies? Do you have a different rule for that? December 1st maybe? You know today is the 1st day you can watch a Christmas movie and we've got a couple of Christmas movies played (or I think) since Thanksgiving in my house. What about the tree? When do you put the tree up, if you put the tree up? The day after Thanksgiving? Anybody put your tree before Thanksgiving? No? Nobody wants to admit it?

How about this one (this is a big one): opening presents. Do you open zero or more than zero presents before Christmas at all? One? We have the one on Christmas Eve tradition in my house. [inaudible audience comment] Yeah, right. I think it helps, sort of helps with the anticipation. So we all have we all have different opinions about this kind of thing, and we are all completely sure that we're right: that the people who violate our personal constellation of holiday policies are not only doing it wrong, but they're doing it wrong because of a lack of character. [audience laughter] I mean, well, maybe it's not their fault. Maybe they were raised by wolves, or, I don't know, they're from Florida or something. [audience laughter]

At any rate it's kind of fun to talk about and argue about these various traditions around the holidays. And in the church we have our own set of rules and traditions about how to observe Christmas but because we're Christians we never get into arguments about it. [audience laughter] Yeah. Right. So some churches put up a Christmas tree, or they put up Christmas wreaths. So my parents got married on December 27th, 1974 in a church in Pennsylvania. And if you look at the pictures from their wedding there's Christmas wreaths all around the church because their church in that little small Pennsylvania town was big into, you know, evergreen observance, or whatever. [audience laughter] Right. But some churches don't do that at all. I mean, I don't know that we've ever had a Christmas tree here at Artisan. Not -- I don't think because of any particular rule or anything. It's just maybe too much work. I don't know.

Some churches have giant live Nativity spectacles. My church growing up was one of those churches. We had a--like--live animals in the parking lot for the week leading up to Christmas, and people were invited to come from the community and drive through and hear this message played over the radio. You know, broadcast onto this little FM band. It was really really quite a thing. Other churches don't do anything like that. You know? Here at Artisan we have a little Christmas pageant and that's, you know, sometimes that's it. Especially on years like this where

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we're in a little bit of disarray. We often, for several years, have done a fancy "invite the neighborhood over for a Christmas tree lighting." You may have noticed that we don't have that on the calendar this year because we're not really in the invite people into the building kind of state just just now.

Some churches sing Joy to the World starting the first Sunday after Thanksgiving, and some churches start singing Joy to the World the first Sunday after Christmas, which might not make any sense at all. But the reason for that last one is, that, the, you know, the official liturgical season of Christmas is the days following Christmas Day. That's the season of Christmastide. The 12 Days of Christmas are not the 12 days before Christmas but the 12 days after Christmas. You shouldn't sing that song at any time of year just to be clear. It's a terrible song. [laughs] [audience laughter] But -- But that's the season that it's actually about.

And the season that comes *before* Christmas is, of course, the season of Advent: a season of anticipation or expectation for the coming of Jesus. And so the reason that you might not sing Joy to the World until after Christmas is because you're singing in the season of Christmas, and you shouldn't be singing Christmas songs during the season of Advent. You should be singing Advent songs: songs of anticipation and hope, right? Theoretically. Ok, so we don't have a hard and fast rule about that at Artisan, and you'll probably hear some Christmas music trickling in over the next couple of weeks. And that's not going to get anybody fired from their high paying music volunteer job here at Artisan. [audience laughter] But for the most part, we save our Christmas carols for our Christmas Eve service. (Which, by the way, are 4 and 6 pm on Christmas Eve, and you should plan on coming to those.)

But here's the thing: whatever your traditions might be, whatever your preferences might be, I'm sure that you have already noticed that the world around you is starting to light up for Christmas, and it's been happening for weeks now--and nothing you can do about it. And so when those lights start going up and the--the plastic trees start showing up in the corner of the Home Depot or the Target or the Wal-Mart, we're suddenly met with the expectation that we should be full of peace and hope and joy...and love. We might not be ready for that! I mean, forget the lights--we may never be ready for the lights until whatever our particular favorite day of the year is when we are. We can look around and see that everything in the world seems to be going wrong, sometimes, and we might not at all be in the mood for peace and joy. And love and hope. We might be particularly aware that those virtues are lacking in our world. But that's exactly why we have the season of Advent. Advent is a season that invites us into that tension. Because even though Advent does ask us to anticipate Jesus (Emmanuel means God with us);

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even though Advent asks us to anticipate the ultimate source of peace and hope and joy and love in our world, it's also a season that asks us to sit in the present moment and not rush too quickly ahead. It asks us to sit in the present moment where peace is still lacking, where joy seems to be a distant memory or a fading hope, where the light of the world has not yet reached every dark corner. Advent is a season of tension.

And today on this 1st Sunday in Advent we are going to be immediately faced with that tension when we read through the lectionary passages. And by the way, this is a great time of year--it's actually a great year, also--to start using the lectionary. If you don't know--if you haven't used it yet, and if you're not familiar with the lectionary, if that idea is new to you--it's very simply a schedule of biblical readings from various parts of the Bible with a number of readings (usually it's 4 but sometimes it's more) assigned to each Sunday of the year over a 3 year cycle. And the reason I say this is a good time of year to start using the lectionary is that it's the beginning of the liturgical Christian calendar. This is the 1st Sunday of the year as the church observes the calendar. And the readings in the lectionary are often tied to the season of the year, but as you can imagine that's that's particularly a prominent feature during the seasons like Advent or Christmas or Lent or Easter. So, if you have not been using the lectionary for your own kind of personal Bible reading and you're looking for an excuse to start, this is a great season to start. And: these 3 year cycles go year A, B, and C. And this happens to be year A. So this is the 1st Sunday of the 1st year of the lectionary. If you're a person who likes to start things at the beginning, this is your best chance to get going with using that as a way to shape your your biblical reading. And I recommend it. It's not the only way you can do this, of course, but a lot of times people come to me and they say, "I'm interested in reading the Bible and I don't know where to start." And I tell them, "Please don't start on page one and just see how far you can get. That's not likely to be a very positive experience for you." The lectionary allows you to kind of jump around from place to place and get a broader sense of the witness of Scripture. And if there's one that troubles you, that's good--you should be troubled by Scripture sometimes, but it's maybe nice not to be constantly troubled for a whole week as you try to read through Lamentations or something like that. Right. Anyway. Start reading the lectionary passages--you can google them and you'll find them on the 1st result. I try to post them on our social media but I usually forget, to be honest with you, so.

But getting back to my point, if we were to take a quick tour through the passages that are assigned by the lectionary for this Sunday, here is what we would find. (Remember we were thinking about this tension and we're going to get hit right with it.) Psalm 122 gives us these ideas: "pray for the peace of Jerusalem, peace be within your walls. For the sake of my relatives and friends, I will say peace be within you". Isaiah 2 is one of the other lectionary readings of this week and it talks about how the "nations, the peoples shall beat their swords into

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plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war anymore". What a lovely image that is, right, by the way, to be taking weapons of war, the sharp blades of a sword, and to beat it into a plow share, the sharp blade of a tool that's used to grow crops to feed people and in a world that is torn by war. That's a very hopeful, lovely image of peace. "Peace, peace, peace be within your walls". But then we turn to the New Testament passages in the lectionary, where those of us who are Christian believers might expect to find more hope, and less uncertainty, and what we find is actually more uncertainty and even references to great evil. You have the Apostle Paul talking in Romans 13, which we heard read earlier, about the debauchery and licentiousness [CS1] about the works of darkness. And you have Jesus reminding us of the flood story, of all things, about people being swept away into the waters, and warning that the second coming will be like a thief in the night. By the way, if that thief in the night passage is your favorite verse in the Bible you should definitely look into becoming a youth pastor in the ninety's. [Laughter] It might be a little bit late to sign up for that job but...That was a popular one when I was a kid.

So, you see what I'm saying, right, this tension that Advent calls to inhabit between peace and uncertainty, between the not studying for war anymore and the works of evil and darkness. And we all long for a day when we find peace in our city and in our world, when nations are not at war, when justice prevails, when the images that we just read from Psalm 122 and Isaiah 2 become the reality, not just hopes and dreams that we might have for the future. And yet we can plainly see that it's not the reality and the scriptures are there to remind us of that too. And so, what are we to do with this? How is it that we should inhabit this tension? That's what Advent is calling us to. How can we find peace in a dark place?

Well, I have two sources of peace in the darkness for you, two small, hopeful thoughts. They're both actually based on the New Testament passages, the ones that seem to present us with less hope, at least this week.

Let's start with Jesus. It's a good place to start, isn't it. The Gospel reading for today that you heard just before the sermon, which you may have read on your own this week, and I would encourage you to do that, is not one that would necessarily put at the top of your list of hopeful passages. But, something that's interesting about it is that we seem to have caught Jesus in the middle of his sermon. Did you notice that? When you have a text that starts out with the words, "but about that day and hour" that's a sentence that if you heard it anywhere else but other than a Bible reading in church you'd go, "wait what? What did you say? What is he talking about? Why did you start right there? That doesn't make any sense at all." I think for some

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reason with the Bible we just, we think of it as so holy that we're just perfectly content to start and stop at, you know, possibly random places. In what might be a whole chapter full of meaning, we are usually more than content with just a verse or two. We just sort of sit there with our head in the clouds waiting for inspiration when clearly this is not the beginning of what Jesus is saying and, indeed, if you were to go back a little bit further in the Gospel of Matthew you would find out what Jesus is talking about, what was the impetus for this conversation, and so forth. I encourage you to do that, I'm not going to tell you all those details right now, but I will say this. And I admit that I stared this passage for quite some time before I decided to just back up even one verse. But if you back up just one verse you have these words: "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away". Now I'll just be honest with you, if you back up more than one verse, it's once again, we're in the less peaceful territory. So it's right in the middle of this very long discourse, that's not particularly good for our digestion, you know, spiritually speaking, where Jesus drops this little nugget. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" and that seems to me to be a verse that you can hang on to in the midst of all kinds of terror and destruction. It comes right in the middle of this discourse, "heaven and earth will pass away", all these things I'm warning you about, your right to be worried, but my words will never pass away. See, everything you have, everything you love, everything you see, it can all pass away, and I'm sorry to tell you that one day it will. But Jesus, the embodiment of God's Word, is the same yesterday, today, and forever and his words will not pass away. I think that is cause for some hope. And if you're looking for something to study other than the works of war, the teachings of Jesus would be a wonderful place to start.

Now similarly, in Romans 13, I find a little nugget of wisdom, a little bit of meaning in the midst of all the uncertainty and evil that Paul lays out in that passage. Paul says, "besides this"--once again a phrase that should make us go back into the text a little bit deeper, but let's just for now stick with this one sentence—"besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep". And again it's in the middle of this passage of uncertainty, of listing the many evils in the world that Paul says, almost like, "don't worry about all those details because you know what you need to do, you know what time it is, you know that it's time for you to wake up from your sleep." That is a powerful call to act, to be alert to what God is doing in the world right now in spite of, and even right in the middle of, all the debauchery and licentiousness and all the uncertainty and evil that we see when we look around. So, we all long for the day when we find peace in our city and in the world, when nations are not at war and justice prevails. But, we have to ask ourselves how should we live our lives while we wait for that day to arrive, even knowing that we may not see it--because that's the reality for the vast majority of Christians who have lived and will live. You might not get to see it with your own eyes, how then should you live if you know that you will spend your

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days in some darkness. Well in one sense, Jesus's words are quite reassuring. We don't know. "About that day and hour, nobody knows, only the Father." And you can decide whether that's going to be very unsettling to you or very comforting to you. Because once you get content with the idea that you don't know, if you can actually find a certain level of peace in there because of the fact that you don't know. It can be a bit of a comfort to say about some specific details of how the universe is structured, "I don't know". Freed from the burden of knowing every detail. We could choose to get busy with living our lives the way we ought to live them, no matter what happens or will happen. Unfortunately, like the stubborn dummies that we are, we hear those words from Jesus and we're like "Ok where are the apocalyptic texts? I need to figure out the exact day and hour!" and Jesus just told you you're not going to get it right! Everybody who's ever predicted a date and time has been wrong. So take comfort that you don't know what you don't know and you do know what you do. And what you do know is that now is the time to wake up. Now is the moment to wake from your sleep. Now is the moment to take comfort in Jesus's words and in his way, which will never pass away, which are the same no matter what's happening in the world around you. And even if you are confused and stumbling around in the darkness, maybe especially if you're confused and stumbling around in the darkness, now is the time when you can and should decide that your posture is going to be one of wakefulness, alertness, readiness, and expectation. Because God is working in all of these evil and dark times and places. God can be found. And you know what else, sometimes you are the source of light, you are the source of God's presence in the world that someone else needs. But don't sleep through it, don't decide to hibernate until the day when Jesus comes back and takes care of everything. Jesus is here now and the kingdom of God is at hand, that's what Jesus said throughout his ministry, I believe it's still true today.

As we observe Advent, as we anticipate the joy and peace that we will celebrate at Christmas, let us wake up to the fact that it's here with us now too and that we have a role to play in making it a reality for our world. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Apostle Paul said. Let's pray. God we want to trust and believe that you are present in our world, that even when we look around and see the pain and suffering, even when we look around and see injustice, even when we look around and sense the fear and feel in our hearts that the world is not what it ought to be, we trust that you are present with us. Help us to seek peace in the darkness. Help us to remember the promises of Christmas, even as we dwell and sit with the tensions of Advent. And may we be part of the work that you want to do in the world. Let us not just pray passively for your kingdom to come on Earth as it is in heaven, but rather, let us act to make that true. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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As we continue to sing this morning, I want to invite you to come and receive Holy Communion. This is a hopeful sacrament. You can come and take a piece of the bread and remember Christ's body which is broken for you. Dip it in one of the cups, wine and juice are both here at the table, and remember Christ's blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of sin. Come and receive the real presence of Christ the Savior in the sacrament. Come and receive strength and nourishment for your spiritual journey. And come and be present and in communion with each other and with Christians around the world and throughout time who have observed this same sacrament. The table is open to all who are seeking Jesus today, you don't need to be a member of our church, we invite you to come if you sense that God is working in your life and inviting you to something more. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at ArtisanChurch.com.