Aren't these odd scriptures to listen to on the first Sunday of Advent? Here we are getting into gear to celebrate Christmas in our homes and to celebrate the birth of Christ together and this is what we hear: “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations...They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” “Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem...for there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David.” “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Not a “Little Town of Bethlehem” or “Away in a Manger” anywhere in the mix.

That's because while Advent is a prelude to Christmas, it is also very much a promise and a warning about when Christ will return again to this world. Advent teaches that it is just as important – more important, really - to prepare for Christ as it is to prepare for Christmas.

Unlike having to fall asleep before Santa Claus will stop at our homes, writers of scripture tell us to stay awake so we don't miss Christ's second arrival. Even if we do nod off, we will awaken quickly when we see what is happening around us. All the nations of the earth will stream to the place where God resides. They will climb the holy mountain and along the way hand their swords and spears and guns to a blacksmith who will pound them into plowshares and pruning hooks and hoes. The sound of the forge will grow louder as hammer bangs on anvil and more and more people arrive weary of war, drawn by the light, ready for the day of peace. No longer will nations possess the weapons of war and no longer will they wish to use them. In that holy place, people will be given the armor of light and ordered to put aside the works of darkness. They will devote their lives to peace and peace will be ours to share with one another, with our angry nation and with all the nations of the world. Justice will reign as the gates of the prisons will be opened; those who are bowed down by pain or poverty will be able to stand tall to see who has set them free; those who have been tightly held in the grip of poverty will be released; those who have never known the promises of Christ will be wrapped in his embrace. Our Lord's justice will reign forever when he comes to gather us like a hen gathers her chicks. But there is more. All, not just the bad guys of this world, all will fall under his judgment. And that time? That time is not just in some unknown future. That time is now and we live in all of its promises and its expectations.

There is a scene in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where the children who have found their way to Narnia are terrified of the Queen's evil ways and are looking forward to Aslan, the good ruler, arriving to save them. When they learn that Aslan is not a man but a lion, the children are startled and even scared. Susan asks, “Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” “That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” replies Mrs. Beaver, “if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else silly.” Lucy asks, “Then he isn't safe?” To which Mr. Beaver responds, “Safe? Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you.” David Lose writes, “Safe? The God of fierce love and determined mercy? The God of unlooked for judgment and unrelenting justice? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. And knowing that makes all the difference.”

So what are we waiting for? For the moment when we place the Christ-child in our favorite manger scenes and then forget about him for the next 364 days or for the days or years or lifetimes it may take the Lord of peace and light to return and fix the mess we have made of his world? Sometimes, especially this time of year, it seems almost possible to bring the power of Christ down to a manageable size and to trust him not to interrupt our preparations for his birth. But he has already been born for us in a delighfully unexpected way. During his time on earth, he taught love – love for friend, family and neighbor AND love for the enemy. By picking fishermen off the beach to be his disciples, he illustrated how he chooses nobodies to carry his word to the world. When he healed those untouchable because of disease and people who had been shunned because of their illnesses, he shined his light into the darkest places. When he ate with sinners and tax collectors and made them his friends, he taught unexpected lessons. By forgiving those who had committed unforgiveable acts, he polished clean those tarnished by evil. By dying and then being raised from death, he guaranteed that we would no longer be people of the darkness, but heirs of his brilliant light. By giving us one another - community – one another, we are able to figure out together what it means to live in this time which is of the Lord but not of all that is to be.

We have our work cut out for us as that community, as the body of Christ in a world that has terribly distorted and ignored his word. But this is who we have been created to be, we who have been plucked out of lives that would have been a lot easier had he not come along. We have been chosen to be peacemakers in the face of wars we have created, for a world that longs for plowshares and pruning hooks. We are called to be unifiers across the chasms we ourselves have dug. We are sent to be forgivers who still are waiting to be forgiven by those we have wronged. We are told to comfort others in their grief and hurt as we yearn for comfort ourselves. We are to bear the light of Christ not just in our Advent worship but in all the days ahead until the one who is light returns. This in-between time in which we live demands all that we have to give. Of course, what we have to give is a gift from God and will keep coming until that time that only God knows.

As James Boyce writes, “The Son of Man is surely coming, but that coming may be at "any time." So the call is to the watchfulness and readiness of waiting, to Advent's invitation to live with imaginations and visions tuned to what God has in store. Waiting takes energy. It takes diligence not to be lulled by the same-old, same-old of each day as we wait for the timing and mystery of God's salvation to unfold.”

“Keep awake for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” We *should* feel nervous about meeting him, for he is powerful and mighty and scary. He isn't safe. Oh, but he is good. He is the king, I tell you.

Amen.

*Advent 1A November 27, 2016 Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish Matthew 24: 36-44*