

1<sup>st</sup> December 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

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Hymns:     **180**   **O come, o come, Immanuel**  
              **331**   **King of kings, majesty**  
              **590**   **Jesus, we thus obey**  
              **177**   **Lo, he comes with clouds descending**

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Readings: **Isaiah 2:1-5**  
              **Romans 13:11-14**  
              **Matthew 24:36-44**

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### “Being Ready”

*Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

*Silence*

Being Ready

Friends, it is only the first Day of Advent, and all around us the Christmas machine is whirling into high gear – adverts are about food and drink, new settees and TVs, or music collections with misty eyed crooners gazing into the middle distance; perfume is being sold us by women in dresses that somehow don't get wet in swimming pools – and all to the backdrop of a continual loop of Christmas music and jingle bells. Litres of drink, piles of pies, turkey, ham, mash and gravy. Buy Buy buy! Stock up on kitchen roll so you can wipe up the sausage roll and Swiss roll that contribute to the extra bit of tummy roll – before the adverts swing back to diet books and exercise programmes on December 26!

You do not have to go to church or read the Gospel to hear the message loud and clear: BE READY! We mobilise for nothing else except war with as much focus, as much commitment from our economy and popular culture. Be ready!

Friends, today I want to reflect on what it is to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. I want to make space for the Gospel to remind us of a home truth. The most dangerous place for a Christian person to be at Christmas is tucked away, bills paid and leftovers in the fridge, doors locked and gates shut to keep us safe, protected from the reality of the world's pain. So this Advent get ready for something else.

By all means, rest, and celebrate – dance, have joy. Let your heart leap as we will hear in two weeks about the baby John in Elizabeth's womb leaping when his mother's cousin Mary arrived, pregnant with Jesus. No killjoys, we Methodists – let us be at the forefront of the dancing, the revelling, the laughter, the welcome and the feast.

When I speak about the public pressure to 'be ready,' I am not just talking about the commercial face of Christmas and pressure to buy and consume and forget and to call it holiday cheer.

The Christmas soundtracks are not quite loud enough, the tinsel not quite thick enough to cover the pain of our world. You might think today's Gospel passage an odd choice for this first Sunday of Advent, the coming of hope and light – this warning of Jesus about judgment and end times.

My fear is that if we do not take hold of what 'being ready' means, for the coming of the Son of Man as commanded in our scripture, others will tell other stories with the best of intention – and these will lead us not towards heart-leaping joy, and open hearted generosity, but to self-protection, anxiety, and fear. Be ready – build a higher wall. Be ready, stock pile weapons, be ready, build prisons faster than schools.

We can do better. Not because we are good, but because God is good. And because the Son of Man is coming and even into our hearts.

So it should be no surprise that when Jesus said it – speaking to his disciples, 'you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour' he meant something other than having all our gifts bought on time.

One misconception about the 'being ready' of Advent is that it is somehow about a frenetic busyness, a kind of anxious toil of busy consuming to distract ourselves from pain, at least until January second.

This is good news not just for us, but for anyone already weary at the thought of parties and shopping crowds: 'being ready' is not about being busy enough (even with church things) that you push right past the man with the cardboard sign in the street, busy enough to throw caution and credit card limits to the wind, busy enough to forget to vote?

Busy enough, full on enough to forget the melting ice cap and the rising sea, let alone the ones working in the factories that made the ribbon and the tinsel? No. The work of Advent is not to step away from the reality of the world, but right in to it. In the confidence of people who have heard the words of the prophet Isaiah and dared to ask 'can this be?'

Being ready is not about covering up or distracting us from the small sad voice that any one of us may have in our own hearts, that asks 'will I be loved?' that knows what it is to be grieving, or afraid, and fears there will not be enough to go around when compassion is handed out. Being ready is not about covering our questions, or our pain with any of the anaesthetics on offer, even the spiritual ones, and their fake solace, passing comfort.

Neither is being ready about pulling back from a world in pain – paralysed as if because we cannot do everything, we do nothing.

So if this is what being ready is NOT, what is it?

Every year at the beginning of Advent I think this year will be different – this will be the year that Mary and Joseph finally get a room! This will be the year she is greeted by a midwife and warm robes and hot broth, not by dark and animals.

But remember, the Son of Man coming into the stable was not God making a mistake.

It wasn't just that Joseph forgot to make the Airbnb reservation – or that the innkeepers of Bethlehem were nasty and ungenerous. No. This was and is God's intention. To come into the broken places of our world. And our journey, our being ready in Advent takes us to some of those same places. In our hearts, and in our world.

We speak of Advent as a season of preparation, and repentance. That is, a season of turning back towards God. Not so we are safe tucked up away, but so we may be there and ready with open hearts when God comes. Because God comes. And because the world is in such great need – and because we have not been abandoned as orphans and because the promise made by Isaiah is yet to be fulfilled - God comes.

So when we hear the Gospel say with great urgency, 'be ready,' for you do not know when the son of man will come, let's remember that we do not know WHEN the Son of Man may come, we do know WHERE. Always, to the corners of our hearts where there is sadness. Always to the corners of our world where there is crisis. And division. And want.

On Friday this week, a man known to police for his previous engagement in terrorist activities attacked people on London Bridge. Passers-by subdued him. Police arrived. And he was killed by police.

And up and down the bridge, through the city streets people pray in this and other moments like it, without pausing to remember whether they believe in God or not. 'Let my loved ones be safe. Let me come safe home. Let those who are not safe find comfort. Let our world find peace. How can this be, again?'

And on Thursday, soon those prayers rippled into speech – and some of them because frightened, and some angry, and many despairing. And now, a few days later, comes the analysis, and the question of what should be done.

We stand in a pregnant moment today, when this situation, the latest fearful episode, calls out, 'be ready'. How will we answer the pregnancy of this moment, of any moment on any dark day?

Will we retreat to fear? By no means. Will we make scapegoats or give up on making peace, because it has not yet come? By no means. And as we prepare for the election not just 2 weeks away, will we give up and find ourselves too busy to vote, however we may vote? I pray not. Being ready is about staying in the place of darkness and having confidence in God, and refusing to be separated from hope.

Today we will hear a young person make a commitment to adult faith. A commitment born not out of staying safe, but taking risk with support, and following God's lead.

Today we are gathered from all over this world, from lands where climate change is a present reality and actual immediate threat.

Today we break bread, and share it – today we remember the breaking of Godself ‘this is my body, this is my blood’ to offer a new way of being in our world. Being ready for the Son of Man – I say again, we may not know when, but we do have a pretty good idea of where, and how.

Here is good news. Advent is all about preparation. Active waiting. Trading anxiety for urgency, fear for joy.

So please, here is the word for each of us today: stop.

Stop with the busy deadlined and bedecked tinsel frenzy, and stop. Stop too with too quick political knee jerk responses, stop with fear, stop with political fear mongering.

These things are a distraction from the command of Jesus, be ready. Start with love. Start with noticing each other and hearing our stories and binding up our wounds. Start with food, and joy, and music, and the great exultation of history that calls out again, ‘O come, O come Emmanuel.’

Our scripture has counsel about what being ready for the coming of the Son of Man might look like. May the jaded among us, the weary among us, the hopeful among us - today open our hearts again to the grace of God. It is God’s promise to each, and for all.