

we dream of the real world¹

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC,
Lexington

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Intro to the readings: It's the first Sunday of Advent, and the first Sunday of a year in the Gospel of Matthew. On the first Sunday of Advent, every year, we hear prophecies of the future. Every Advent we start with a prophetic view of a strange future - a revealing - a vision of Jesus' second coming written in a time folks expected it to happen any second in a season when we mostly *remember* Jesus' first coming. Advent has us looking forward. What will be revealed and how do we live into that? Today we also hear from the Hebrew Bible, from the prophet Isaiah. A word of hope to a people facing exile. Christians have read Jesus back into the ancient prophets; it would be better for us to remember that Jesus grounded himself in the teachings of the prophets, the scriptures of his faith. And Matthew, the Gospel we'll be in for a while, emphasized continuity with Judaism presenting Jesus in the line of Moses.

¹ From adrienne maree brown's poem, "it is our turn to carry the world",
<https://adriennemareebrown.net/2025/01/20/it-is-our-turn-to-carry-the-world/>

Today, we hear two prophecies, two ways of looking at the future, both with *hope*, but the text from Matthew may at first sound shocking to us.

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

3

Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

4

He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.

5

O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶ 'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken

and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

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God as a child, God with us, entered a frightened world to bring Good news.

God engaged a frightened world to offer a vision.

God spoke to a frightened world to share hope.

God speaks to a frightened world to share hope.

Our God is the one who comes to the world.²

This is the first Sunday of Advent, a season when we hold multiple truths together at once:

² Fred Craddock in Preaching Through the Christian Year A, Advent 1

We hold the experience and expectation of prophets through the ages, and the future they envisioned, which seems yet to arrive.

We remember the story of Jesus, God in the flesh.

We look forward to his coming again.

Okay, that last one is tricky. We look forward to the return of Jesus Christ.

When the Gospels were written, there was a more active expectation of Christ's imminent return. The original meaning of Advent, *literally coming into view*, was a season to prepare for Christ's return. For a future Christ's followers longed for.

You must be ready. About that day and hour, no one knows, said Matthew. *But for Matthew and the community, Jesus was coming.* There was a future to prepare for. Be awake, prepare for the coming of the Lord.

And Jesus said again and again - the kingdom is near. He was deeply rooted in the prophets' teachings. He would have known the vision of Isaiah:

they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.

He pointed his followers to a future with hope.

What should we do with the Matthew text? Let me tell you what *not* to do with it. Don't turn it into a prooftext for the Left Behind novels. Don't get out your calculators and try to DaVinci Code this text or any other to figure out the day and the hour when something dramatic is going to happen. Don't read this as a literal prediction of what Christ's return will be like.

Instead let us hold this text in parallel to Isaiah - in other words, as a word of hope and a word of warning and an approach to building a holy future? Rather than hearing Matthew with fear, can we hear it as an invitation to stay faithful, today and tomorrow?

African-American Science Fiction writer Octavia Butler wrote, in her essay "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future": "The very act of trying to look ahead to discern the possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope."³

³ Octavia E. Butler, writing in Essence Magazine in 2000.

Jesus invited his followers to prepare for the future - to be ready, to stay awake, to keep following his teachings even when he wasn't present to them, even when things were deeply uncertain.

The Isaiah text might be easier to hear because - if you only read these few verses - it's just a promise, a pleasant prediction. These verses in isolation ask nothing of us. But folks, read the rest of Isaiah. It was just two weeks ago that Rev. Omberg reminded us of the challenge of Isaiah to the people to be just and compassionate.

Not everything Isaiah said about the future has come true, yet. Not everything Jesus as recorded by Matthew said about the future has come true, yet. But their visions of the future draw us forward in hope. Their visions of the future give us a way to live even in liminal or difficult seasons.

Our God is the one who comes to the world, who comes to a frightened world.

Our God is the one who comes to the world, who comes when the need is greatest. Our God is the one who keeps coming into the world when the need is great.

Our God is the one *who teaches us how to live*, how to stay awake, how to take care of one another, how to build the future, how to work for the day when swords will be

transformed into ploughshares. Therefore we must be ready. We must prepare the way of the Lord.

We look to the prophets to show us the way - when the way is not clear. As Christians, we look to Jesus when the way is not clear. When the way is not clear, when things are challenging, we keep awake and do our best, and band together in community and serve our neighbors and follow the Way of God with us and live in the in between.

“God’s greatest work occurs in liminal spaces.”⁴

We can’t know the day or the hour. But we can trust that God is working in our lives and in our world, offering warning and showing us the way, and calling us to love, and giving us reason to choose hope.

I come back to Octavia Butler, writing of predicting the future in science fiction:

So why try to predict the future at all if it’s so difficult, so nearly impossible? Because making predictions is one way to give warning when we see ourselves drifting in dangerous directions. Because prediction is a useful way of pointing out safer, wiser courses. Because, most of all, our tomorrow is the child of our today. Through thought and deed, we exert a great deal of

⁴ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, Kindle Edition.

*influence over this child, even though we can't control it absolutely. Best to think about it though. Best to try to shape it into something good. Best to do that for any child.*⁵

I want to close today with a poem recently published by a womanist writer and scholar of Octavia Butler, the great adrienne maree brown. brown's poem is as much about our role in building the future as this morning's Bible passages.

it is our turn to carry the world⁶
—adrienne maree brown

we are each other's safety
right now, and every day
decide who you will protect
yourself, your own and who else

it's time to cover all that we love
land, creature, place, person
intertwine your roots with mine
in this way our lives become miracles

⁵ "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future" by Octavia E. Butler, writing in Essence Magazine in 2000.

⁶ <https://adriennemareebrown.net/2025/01/20/it-is-our-turn-to-carry-the-world/> Punctuation and capitalization are original to the author.

there will be strangers
they will become comrades
we will each say our needs
we will learn to let community come closer

every part of us is a shield
our words, our trust, our hearts
our bodies in action
and the freedom to think for ourselves

we are the adaptation
no oppressor can imagine
our love is water – form-shifting power, river, vapor, life
we flood each other with belonging

we are building our stamina
we dream of the real world
we carry god, and see god, in each of our faces
your holiness is not too heavy, not for me

our attention and courage
show us the next stand to take
the next hill on which to hold each other
and if needed, the next hiding place: survive!

our imagination and memory
find the wisdom of our ancestors

find our future in the rubble
find the seeds in our songs

we choose our freedom
we keep each other's souls intact
safer than any cage of empire
we know something better is coming

we are each other's safety
we see each other's freest selves
we will hold on tight, in public, in private
over and underground

and we will never let go
we will never let go
we will never let go
we will never let go