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“Secret Agents of the Kingdom of God”

Happy Advent, everyone! I hope you’re still feeling a little warm and fuzzy from Thanksgiving. I know some of you have already gotten those Christmas decorations out of storage and are excited to deck the halls. Something else you might find exciting – we are in a new lectionary cycle! I know you’re pumped.

We have moved into a new liturgical year and into the Gospel of Matthew, having finished with Luke last week. So in a way, this is New Year’s Day, which always begins with Jesus getting apocalyptic. Whenever we hear the Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent, Jesus is describing the Second Coming.

“As the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Lord,” he says. Right off the bat, this isn’t sounding so good. In the days of Noah, everyone except Noah and his family got swept away in the flood. Next we get twin examples of people going about their daily work, when two are taken and two are left. Whether it’s better to be the ones taken or left isn’t clear, but it *is* clear that two of these four people are in trouble.

And finally, we have the story about the thief breaking into someone’s house. If you know when the thief is coming, you can be ready for him. But you *can’t* know when he’s coming, so that means you have to be ready all the time. In other words, we always have to be ready for Christ’s return. Jesus is coming back, and when he does, he will establish his Kingdom. The New Jerusalem. Heaven and earth united as one. According to Matthew, how we act now will make a difference in how our lives will be when that kingdom comes.

The picture Matthew paints can be a little jarring, especially after we’ve just celebrated Thanksgiving and are getting ready for the “most wonderful time of the year.” But it’s also perfect because Advent is designed to remind us of why we *need* Christ to return, and why we needed him to come the first time.

Advent helps us avoid barreling toward Christmas Day without taking the time to ponder the state of our lives or the state of the world. It encourages us to stop and think about the ways we either support or hinder the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Now, we know that we are fallen people living in a fallen world. It goes without saying that our country, for example, does not exactly represent a peaceable kingdom right now. In the first week after the presidential election, there were 800 reported incidents of hate crimes in the U.S. – more than in the period immediately after 9/11. Muslim women having their headscarves pulled off. School girls having their crotches grabbed by fellow students. Hundreds of swastikas, N words, and other white supremacist vitriol scrawled across doors, walls, windows,

and social media.¹ Even Episcopal churches have been defaced for our inclusivity and stance on LGBTQ rights.

The perpetrators of these, and worse, crimes feel emboldened to display such socially abhorrent behavior. They want to normalize their discrimination and justify a blatant disregard for the humanity of their neighbors. I am certain no one in the current or incoming administration supports these manifestations of evil, just like I'm certain no one in this church supports them.

But the fact that they are happening is an indictment of us all. Racism, classism, sexism, ethnocentrism – all kinds of isms are woven deeply into the fabric of our society and our consciousness. And they bear some very ugly fruits when we aren't actively addressing them in ourselves and in others. The same is true of addiction, disease, economic disparity, and a host of other ills. So yes, we know we need Jesus, and we know these problems will never disappear completely until he comes back.

So what do we do now?

According to the Gospels, and the liturgical season of Advent, we keep watch while we wait. The idea of keeping watch for Jesus' return means that our waiting is not hopeless nor helpless. We're not just sitting around alternating wishful thinking with moments of despair. In the words of Matthew, waiting for the Second Coming is a matter of being "awake" and "ready." We don't watch the sky; we watch the world. We don't look up; we look around. We pay attention to the times and places where opportunities for mission and ministry present themselves.

So I'm going to offer you one of many ways to think about this idea of watchfulness. But first, I'll give you a hint: [*sing tune to Secret Agent Man*]

For those of you who didn't get the reference, I'm talking about the model of the secret agent. There is no one more ready and more watchful than a secret agent. As Christians, we can think of ourselves as secret agents of the Kingdom of God. This doesn't mean we keep our identity a secret. It doesn't mean we act in secret. It just means we are always alert and ready to do our mission, which comes to us from on high. Our singular mission is to advance God's Kingdom on earth until Christ returns and brings the Kingdom into its fullness. So we need to be on the lookout for ways of doing that.

When you're at work, look for who in the office might need a word of encouragement. When you're in casual conversation, look for ways to talk about your faith or ask another person about theirs. For our youth here today, look out for students who are socially weak – the ones who get picked on. Go out of your way to be nice.

All of us can stand up for people being treated unfairly – whether that means confronting a bully, or calling our congresspersons. All of us can be ready to call out bad behavior when we see it, and harmful language when we hear it. All of us can reach out to people who are scared, hurting, or in need. That's being a secret agent of the Kingdom.

¹ Rev. Nancy Rockwell. "The Christ Child Is Coming and the Market is God." *Patheos*. Web. Accessed November 26, 2016.

The idea is to pay attention to our circumstances at all times, and be open to how the Holy Spirit prompts us to respond to them. This means looking for ways to impact our immediate surroundings. Like helping the person with the stroller up the subway steps instead of trying to text and walk at the same time.

It also means considering the larger circumstances of our power and privilege in life and looking for ways to use those things for good. For example, we've been talking a lot about financial stewardship recently. This includes giving to the church for the spread of God's Kingdom through the life and ministries of Incarnation. It also includes giving for the spread of the Kingdom through other organizations.

In two days, it will be Giving Tuesday. We've gone through Black Friday and Small Business Saturday. Tomorrow is Cyber Monday, and then Giving Tuesday. Maybe next year we'll have Go to Church Sunday. In any event, what causes might you want to support on Giving Tuesday? What organizations do you feel need you right now? Even if it's only \$5 a month?

Finally, being a secret agent of the Kingdom means paying attention to what's going on inside *us*, and responding to that in ways that are healthy and constructive. Perhaps you've heard of Subway Therapy. It's an interactive art installation in the Union Square subway station. Since the election, people passing through the station have been invited to write down their feelings on post-it notes and stick them up. There is now a very expansive wall of literally thousands of brightly colored post-its. The point is to give people a chance to recognize and share what they're feeling in a communal way – a way that is intended to create a catalyst to do good.

A 29-year-old man named Korkulor Jenson has done much to facilitate this emotional art. He's a father of two and a construction worker from Staten Island. Instead of going home at the end of the workday, he has spent several days volunteering his time to hand out post-its. In so doing, he has consoled people who are crying, he's gotten Governor Cuomo to participate in the project, and whenever he sees someone start to write a nasty message, he encourages that person to write something positive instead.

"If you're sad, you have to act on it," Jenson says. "You can't just be sad within yourself and go home and get depressed and then create negative thoughts about other people."

This is very sound, spiritual advice.

Jenson wants to create a better country for his children. "I have to keep including myself in the world," he says. For now, his ministry of post-it notes is helping him do just that.²

As Christians, we too are charged with including ourselves in the world, in ways big and small, until Christ returns in all his glory. This means we look to the future with hope. And we remain *on* the lookout – for more needs to fill, and more people to love, as agents of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

² Haley Goldberg. "Post-It Therapy Is Helping People Heal after an Emotional Election." *SELF*. Web. Accessed November 26, 2016.