

What is the World Like? –Matthew 24:26-34

St Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV

Advent 1 (November 27,) 2016

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Once upon a time, the story begins, God and a man were walking down the road The man asked God, **“What is the world like?”**

God replied, **“I cannot talk when I am thirsty. If you could get me a drink of cool water, we could discuss what the world is like There is a village nearby. Go and get me a drink.”**

The man went into the village and knocked at the door of the first house. A beautiful young woman opened the door. His eyes gaped, but he managed to say, **“I need a drink of cool water.”**

“Of course,” She said, smiling, **“but it is midday. Would you care to stay for some lunch.?”**

“I AM hungry,” he realized, looking over his shoulder. **“Your offer is a great kindness. Thank you very much,”** he told her.

He went in and the door closed behind him.

Thirty years went by. The man who wanted to know what the world was like and the woman who offered him food had married and raised five children He became a respected merchant and she was an honored member of the community in which they lived. One day, a terrible storm came in off the ocean and threatened their life. The man cried out, **“Help me, God!”**

A voice came from the midst of the storm, which said, **“Where is my cup of cold water?”**

Spiritual traditions always warn people about becoming lost in the world.

One woman said that she wants inscribed on her tombstone: **“IT’S ALWAYS SOMETHING.”**

What is the world like? ... **A place of forgetfulness** ... (a la Matthew) **where we fall asleep**

This dominance of everyday activity is particularly true in the Christmas/Advent season. Already busy people become busier. Frantic preparation puts people to sleep spiritually. People begin to long **not for the birth of Christ** but for the lazy doldrums days of January.

- We wrongly treat spirit as luxury.
- If our bodies are hurting, we will pay attention to them and work hard to recover our physical health.
- If our financial security or social status is under attack, we will struggle and fight ceaselessly for our money and position.
- But we will allow our spirit to languish and even atrophy.

This tendency to neglect spirit may be the underlying insight of Matthew into the people of Noah’s day.

In wrestling, there is a move called **“the sleeper hold.”** It is a fairly simple move used in wrestling and most of the martial arts forms. It is, with

some variations, very simple in its application, and undeniably effective. It simply chokes your opponent into submission.

In life, we, too often, use the sleeper hold on ourself ... choking out the awakeness of vital living and submitting to ignoring what is really important in life

But, for many of us, the spirit is willing but the flesh is too weak, to avoid the “sleeper hold” of the season.

Here are some simple suggested exercises that might work for you ... to avoid the sleep hold of the season, and bring us back to life, to vitality, to spiritual awareness:

1. A certain Jewish doctor says a prayer of purification every time she washes her hands. She explains that the prayer is not meant to purify her so much as to remind her that the person she is treating is more than their disease. In other words, she says awake to the spiritual dimension of people while she attends to their physical illnesses. She realizes that they are more than just “cases.”
2. Another man pauses before a Christmas tree in the building where he works. He brings to mind the connection between heaven and earth signified by the tree (as Martin Luther first recognized when he gave us our first Christmas trees), and considers how all creation is grounded in God’s participation. When he remembers this, he says that his day is more alive. He claims that it makes him more aware of the living God that is in each person he meets and in each part of creation that he confronts, so long as he pays attention.
3. Last Sunday, the preacher at Saint Marks suggested that we each take each thing that we eat, or prepare to eat ... each piece of clothing that we

put on ... and STOP and consider where it came from ... and who made it ... and where did the ingredients come from ... and run them all back ... realizing that it ALWAYS goes back to Jesus. Jesus is the source of all that is.

Spiritual exercises, such as these, help protect us from the intensity that the world tends to press down on us during this season – be it secular pressures or pressures to do all that “good people” or “church people” or “good family people” do in this season. **Such exercises require intention and discipline ... AND require us to slow down and do the exercise regularly.** They never work by simply thinking ABOUT them.

It's not just new for our age ... it's as old as the Gospel of Matthew, who understood about the “sleeper hold” that can come on us all.

Sometimes ... just sometimes ... we might get lucky ... and the person we love very much has a heart attack, and we are snapped like a whiplash, back into reality of re-sorting priorities, of re-aligning what is really important.

But that's not a kind of luck that I wish upon any of us. Rather, it is my prayer that we might each take the time ... and the DISCIPLINE ... to actually spend time AWAKE to what God really wants us to focus on in this season.

- **Wake up!**
- **Stay focused!**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.