

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.

First Sunday in Advent

November 27, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Stay Alert”

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5

Christian Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44



Credit: Advent Journey Coloring Posters: An Advent Art Project for All Ages

“Among the most prolific modern predictors of end times, Harold Camping has publicly predicted the end of the world as many as twelve times based on his interpretations of biblical numerology. In 1992, Camping published a book, ominously titled *1994?*, which predicted the end of the world to occur sometime around that year. Perhaps his most high-profile predication was for May 21, 2011, a date that he calculated to be exactly seven thousand years after the biblical flood (we hear about the Flood in our Matthew reading). When that date passed

without incident, he declared his math to be off and pushed back the end of the world to October 21, 2011.”¹ Well, the end of the world did not occur then either.

Many over the millennium have forecast the end of the world when God would right all wrongs and thus reign over all Creation. Most, if not all, of the prophets predicted what was referred to as the ‘Day of the Lord’.² Isaiah certainly did, and we heard about it in chapter two. Jesus also predicted the end of the world would come. And again, we heard it in our reading from the gospel according to Matthew. Yet, Jesus confessed to not knowing when it would happen (Mark 13:32). He even discouraged one from trying to figure it out. It is likely that the apostle Paul believed the end of the world would happen within his lifetime

¹ Rachel Cole, “Ten Failed Doomsday Predictions”, *Britannica*. Found at: <https://www.britannica.com/list/10-failed-doomsday-predictions>, accessed November 26, 2022.

See also:

Robert McFadden, Harold Camping, Dogged Forecaster of the End of the World, Dies at 92”, *New York Times*, December 17, 2013. Found at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/us/harold-camping-radio-entrepreneur-who-predicted-worlds-end-dies-at-92.html>, accessed November 26, 2022.

² The phrase ‘day of the Lord’ usually identifies events that take place at the end of history (Isaiah 7:18-25) and is often closely associated with the phrase ‘that day’. One key to understanding these phrases is to note that they always identify a span of time during which God personally intervenes in history, directly or indirectly, to accomplish some specific aspect of God’s plan.

See: “Got Questions” at <https://www.gotquestions.org/day-of-the-Lord.html>, accessed November 28, 2022.

(I Thessalonians 4:15–17), yet he did not try to pinpoint when this would be.³ So far, everyone who has ever calculated the *parousia*, or the ‘apocalypse’, to occur, before today, has been wrong. I do not see much reason to predict the day and time of the inauguration of Christ’s advent. Although, to be honest, I did think it would be amusing to propose to the church Council that I spend my entire three-month sabbatical next year trying to figure it out!

I suspect that people have always been tempted to figure out when God would establish the kin-dom on Earth just as it is in heaven because it affirms them to know something that other people do not. And, it also makes them feel even important to share with someone only that which they know. That is why there are so many ultimate diet ‘secrets’ out there! The dietician engenders a great sense of self-importance when he divulges his or her diet ‘secret’ to millions of people – for only \$9.99, of course!

Another reason why folks try to predict the Second Coming of Christ is because they fear it. There are many apocalyptic scenes in the Bible that signal the end of an age: Adam and Eve being cast out of the garden, all of the creatures

³ The phrase ‘the day of the Lord’ is used often in the Hebrew Testament (e.g. Isaiah 2:12; 13:6, 9; Ezekiel 13:5, 30:3; Joel 1:15, 2:1,11,31; 3:14; Amos 5:18,20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi 4:5) and several times in the Christian Testament (e.g. Acts 2:20; I Corinthians 5:5; II Corinthians 1:14; I Thessalonians 5:2; II Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10). It is also alluded to in other passages (Revelation 6:17; 16:14).

of the Earth drowning in a global flood, and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. All of these events were remembered as narrations of God's efforts to establish justice, to right wrongs, to correct matters, and set them straight. Throughout the biblical narrative, God's efforts to establish justice are a great cause for concern for those who have much for which to account.

Most Hebrews who lived in the Ancient Near East during the years the prophet Isaiah preached feared the coming of the Day of the Lord. Jenifer read chapter 2 of Isaiah, which provides lots of positive news about the coming reign of God. But chapter one describes the flip side of God's justice, which is terrifying!

In regards to 'The Day of the Lord', I believe we focus too much on the bad news it is for those who perhaps feel guilty rather than the good news it is for those who lived positively. Our newspapers and network television news programs are, more often than not, full of bad news. The media has to try really hard to include some good news stories. Yet, to be honest, good news stories don't really sell as well as bad news stories. The same holds true with our faith tradition; we seem to dwell on the negative.

Our reading from Matthew narrates two sides to the Jesus' Second Coming. One will be taken, and that is to be feared, and one will remain to experience God's restoration. Our reading from Matthew cautions us therefore to be ready,

be prepared, and to 'Stay Alert'. Isaiah's chapter two focuses on the positive, when people will honor and follow God's ways by "beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation". Can't you feel the love there?!

As a person of faith, I am not going to stay alert by dwelling on some sort of quest for certainty by trying to identify the date and time. As a person of faith, I am also going to stay alert by focusing on the positive ramifications of God's work completed. So, what does it mean to stay alert without worrying about when or how bad will it be?

In her Advent commentary Lenora Tisdale shares with us that staying alert means that we are "called to be on the lookout for God and goodness to break into our world at any minute! [...] In the meantime, we are called to live in eager expectation of that inbreaking here and now."⁴

"Whenever justice breaks out unexpectedly, God is in our midst!"⁵ Staying alert during Advent means paying attention to Windham World Affairs Council's efforts to support Peace Jam. Peace Jam is an initiative supported by Nobel Peace

⁴ Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, "First Sunday in Advent", *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A*, eds. Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald Allen, and Dale Andrews (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 5.

⁵ Tisdale, "First Sunday in Advent", 5.

Prize-winner Jody Williams at Brattleboro Memorial High School that develops in youth a passion for global justice efforts.⁶

“Whenever people of faith make peace instead of war, God is in our midst!”⁷ Staying alert during Advent in Brattleboro means taking notice when our church’s friend, Isaac Evans-Franz, discusses with soon-to-be Senator Peter Welch about how to support a resolution and vote to end the Saudi war on Yemen.⁸

⁶ Peace Jam

Windham World Affairs Council (WWAC) began working with Nobel Peace Laureate and WWAC Member Jody Williams when we presented her ZOOM talk in 2020.

We created a Peace Jam Task Force comprised of Carla Lineback, Amanda Thurber, Lissa Weinmann, Kerstin Roos, Kenny Pepper on behalf of The Commons Media Mentoring Project and Lauren Coffano of PeaceJam international and are building a PeaceJam Community Support Group to help initiate an ongoing club and programming at Brattleboro Union High School students starting September 2022.

WWAC, working with the Brattleboro Rotary, sent two BUHS students attended a PeaceJam regional conference with Kailash Satyarthi in April 2022.

Found at: <https://www.windhamworldaffairscouncil.org/projects/peace-jam/>, accessed November 28, 2022.

⁷ Tisdale, “First Sunday in Advent”, 5.

⁸ November 24, 2022

Before I go to bed, I wanted to thank you, on this day of Thanksgiving, for your work for peace and justice, and your support of Action Corps and our work changing laws to save lives. I'm grateful to all of you.

Also wanted you to know that Rep. Peter Welch called me yesterday to discuss the Vermonters' Vision for a New Foreign Policy that we had shared with him. We talked about the role he can play as Senator Welch from Vermont in advancing a pro-peace, pro-diplomacy, pro-human-rights agenda. We spoke specifically about how he could support an [initiative for global economic justice](#), and what he could do to help get a vote this year on U.S. participation in the Saudi [war in Yemen](#). He agreed to do everything I asked.

This would not have happened without you. This happened because Vermonters have rallied, written, called, lobbied, and persisted. The conversation I had with Peter is because enough people in our state care, and have consistently shown up. Even though there are too many problems, and they are too big, we have not given up. The call I got yesterday was a result of that.

I thank you for your solidarity and look forward to the days ahead with all of you.
Warm regards from southern Vermont, Isaac Evans-Frantz

Staying alert means listening to Daniel Sicken and his advocacy that cautions us against contributing to the military industrial complex.⁹



Staying alert means listening to him as a prophet, no matter if we do not yet have the radical faith he demonstrates.

“Whenever people of faith break forth their doctrinal dividing lines to worship the same God, God is in our midst!”¹⁰ Staying alert during Advent in Brattleboro means celebrating women from three Christian churches throwing a baby shower in our parlor for a Muslim woman who recently immigrated to the United States (November 17, 2022).

⁹ Daniel Sicken of Pioneer Valley War Tax Resistance made his opinion clear during the march from Union Square to Dag Hammarskjold Plaza near the United Nations on Sunday, April 26, organized by Peace & Planet: Mobilization for a Nuclear-Free, Peaceful, Just, and Sustainable World. Photo by Ed Hedemann. December 2, 2015.
Found at: <https://nwtrcc.org/2015/04/29/not-paying-for-nukes/daniel-sicken-with-wtr-sign/>, accessed November 28, 2022.

¹⁰ Tisdale, “First Sunday in Advent”, 5.



“For those small signs of goodness we see in our daily life are but a foretaste of the goodness we will taste in fullness when God establishes his kingdom on Earth just as it is in heaven.”¹¹ Staying alert during Advent in

¹¹ Tisdale, “First Sunday in Advent”, 5.

Brattleboro means celebrating the on-going efforts, stories, and relationships that Compassionate Brattleboro fosters in our town and around the world.¹²

“So, stay awake! Keep alert. Because whatever happen, you don’t want to miss the presence of the God who comes not only to judge but also to redeem us.”¹³

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.

¹² From the minutes of Compassionate Brattleboro’s last meeting on November 21, 2023:

Scott is back from time spent with our sister community in El Salvador (Cabanitas). The problems the community and the country at large are facing include: Serious economic woes, gangs – but also the serious human rights abuses inflicted by the government in going after them, and climate change consequences – including storms and landslides which are destroying the country’s infrastructure.

Miriam is back from our Tsidi To’ii sister community in Arizona where she engineered a remarkable – and, from all accounts, invaluable connection with the film crew responsible for *The Wisdom of Trauma*, and now filming stories of communities which have been traumatized over time.

¹³ Tisdale, “First Sunday in Advent”, 5.