

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, November 27, 2022

1 Advent, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 2:1-5](#)

[Psalm 122](#)

[Romans 13:11-14](#)

[Matthew 24:36-44](#)

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It's a dangerous beast, the hippo.

Many of us think of hippos as cute, waddly zoo creatures. But a hippopotamus in the wild is aggressive, territorial, and deadly if provoked. There are more human deaths by hippo each year than by lions, tigers, or bears.

World-class whitewater rafter Juliet Starrett tells a story of a time when she was attacked by a hippo. She had just competed in the Whitewater World Championships in Africa and was celebrating with a canoe trip down the Zambezi River with her mother. Suddenly, without warning, a hippopotamus surfaced and flung their canoe ten feet into the air. One moment Juliet was paddling, the next she found herself flying through the air toward a hippo- and crocodile-infested river. But Juliet was a trained athlete and her reflexes kicked in instantly. "I knew what my plan of attack would be while I was flying through the air," she said later. "I was already swimming the minute my body hit the water. I was primed and ready to react quickly and deal with the unexpected."

She and her mother made it to the nearest shore, patched the canoe together with duct tape, and managed to paddle their way out with only minor injuries.¹

There are moments that break in on us without warning, without any chance to pull ourselves together and prepare, where the only preparation is in how we have been living our whole lives up to that moment. Today our scripture readings point us to the ultimate moment, what the ancient prophets of Israel called “the Day of the Lord,” and what Jesus in today’s gospel calls “the coming of the Son of Man.” About that day and hour no one knows, he says, not even he himself. The Son of Man will come like a thief in the night, like a hippo rearing up out of the river. And the question for us is: how will he find us when he comes?

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, a season of joy and anticipation, a season of excitement and hope—and a season also of penitence and self-examination, because how can we prepare for the coming of Christ without asking ourselves if we’re ready to meet him? In this season leading up to Christmas it might seem odd to come to church and hear readings not about the manger in Bethlehem but about the end of the world. But Advent is a season that points us beyond just Jingle Bells and Santa and hot apple cider, good though those things are. It’s a season that points us even beyond Christmas Eve and the manger and the shepherds, good though those things are. Advent is about both beginnings and endings, the beginning of a new church year that points us to the end of all things.

¹ I encountered this story in Joshua Bowron, “Be Awake and Ready,” *Sermons That Work* (November 27, 2016), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/be-awake-and-ready-advent-1-a-2016/>. Another version of the story, with the quote from Juliet Starrett, is found in Joe De Sena, “How to Get Your Body and Mind Into a Ready State,” <https://www.inc.com/joe-desena/functional-movement.html>.

The twelfth-century Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote that there are not one, not two, but three Advents we celebrate during Advent; three different comings of Jesus. The first one happened at Bethlehem when he came to us as a newborn child. The final one will happen at the end of time when God brings the whole story of creation to a glorious triumph, when nation no longer lifts up a sword against nation, and when Jesus is revealed as the heart of the story, the one in whom God and humanity are joined. But there's a third coming that is invisible, that happens here and now, every day of our lives: the presence of Jesus to us in our hearts, in scripture, in the sacraments, and in the faces of our neighbors, especially our neighbors in need.

We prepare for the coming of Jesus in glory by attending to all those ways he's present here and now, most of all by practicing kindness, and charity, and compassion. Just a few verses later in this chapter from Matthew's gospel Jesus will tell the famous story of the Last Judgment when Jesus says to those on his right hand, "Come, you blessed by my Father, enter into your joy, because I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." And when they ask him, "Lord, when did we do those things to you?" he answers, "Truly, just as you did it to the least of these my family, you did it to me." And to those who failed to practice compassion to their neighbors he answers, "Just as you did not do it to the least of these, so you did not do it to me."

This Advent my prayer for us is that we will seek Jesus each day in prayer, in scripture, and in intentional acts of kindness. To do that takes time, and space, and intention. Which is why another Advent practice, one that can be hard to do in our culture's busy Christmas rush, is rest and quiet.

There's a famous story about another great aquatic beast, not the hippopotamus but the whale, the great white whale named Moby-Dick in Herman Melville's famous novel. Melville writes about the whaleboat that lowers down onto the ocean and the rowers that strike out in pursuit of the whale, the harpooner in the first row, setting an example to all of them with his herculean rowing and his shouts of encouragement; and then, just as he's exhausted with rowing and shouting, the moment arrives and the harpooner has to turn, stand, and hurl a heavy lance thirty feet through the air at his target. This is wrong, Melville says. If you want to catch a whale, the harpooner should put down the oar. Let the boat move a little slower, let there be one less rower; but let the harpooner be alert, rested, and poised. "To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart," he writes, "the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil."²

This Advent may there be moments of idleness, not so that our hearts may be dulled but so that they may be alert and ready for the coming of the great Hippo, the great White Whale, the Son of Man who comes to us as our judge but also as our savior and friend.

² *Moby-Dick*, from Chapter 62, "The Dart," famously reflected on by Eugene Peterson in, e.g., "The Harpooner's Calm," *Christianity Today* (November 8, 1985), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1985/november-8/meditation-harpooners-calm.html>.