

*St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven*  
*November 30, 2025*

Jesus said to the disciples, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." ~Matthew 24:36-44

A famous violinist was being interviewed by a student group I had taken to hear him play in Fairfield. He was in the middle of a grueling concert tour. He would be in as many as four cities in one week. His schedule had him at times racing from airport to concert hall, with nothing else for dinner other than something grabbed on the run from a hot-dog stand. He would play high-profile events in major international venues on three or four hours' sleep. For half the tour, he'd had to play through the congestion, achiness and low-grade fever of a virus. "How do you do it?" a student asked him. The question was on all of our minds. And he gave us the answer we hoped — deeply, deeply hoped — he wouldn't give us. "The only way," he said, "is constant practice. Several hours every day. I practice until the music has become so much part of me that I can play no matter what the circumstances. I can't let up for a single day, or else I just won't be ready." "Surely you can skip here or there," another student asked. "Not if I want to be ready for *anything*," he said. "And you and I have to be ready for anything."

We were all sobered by his answer, though we all knew that he was right. I was among the most sobered, because, I regret to admit, I've never been as consistent and thorough as I should be in my own practice. As he spoke, I remembered a terrifying moment from my earliest days as a performer, when I had stupidly agreed to play a concert on Easter afternoon. I had played twelve Holy Week services, including three that morning. I had never been so exhausted. I don't remember much else except that the singer sang Handel's "I know that my Redeemer liveth," and that halfway through our performance I fell asleep. Yes, fell asleep. Then I woke up, realized that I had fallen asleep and also realized that somehow I had *continued playing* while I was asleep. Fortunately, I had fallen asleep in the middle of the one piece on the concert I knew well, the one I had played three times already that Easter day and dozens of times over my lifetime. I was lucky because, despite my spotty habits, in that one moment I happened to be ready.

Athletes and dancers talk about this phenomenon as well. Think of the gymnast filled with anger at her overbearing coach, the diver consumed with grief over a recent loss, the dancer whose girlfriend left him just this morning. They all have to be ready. And so they work for hours every day and they train their bodies for anything. They drink water, they eat well, and, yes, they stay away from alcohol and tobacco, but, more than anything else, they train and they train and they train beyond the point of feeling prepared to the point of feeling ready. Ready for anything.

Spiritual masters talk about this phenomenon as well. I remember vividly attending a retreat about ten years ago with one who talked about precisely that. His life had included ten years as a priest and a monk. He was a spiritual master. He had also spent 20 years working in Boston doing fundraising and development work for non-profits. He was anything but a detached or solitary figure. He knew what it's like to live in a community much like ours. His name was Charles and he grounded his retreat in a simple question: Are we ready? Are we ready to care for those around us, to reach out to those in need, to be disciples, are we ready to love each other? Are we ready to hear the voice of God, to recognize God's presence in our midst, to feel the movement and guidance of the Spirit?

*His* message, too, was sobering. Our lives, he proposed, are filled to overflowing with many wonderful things, but they are also filled with so many distractions and anxieties -- in Paul's phrase *in jealousy and quarreling* -- that we need to acknowledge that we're not always ready to reach out, not always ready to hear God's voice in our midst. And we need to acknowledge that we have trouble finding the time to practice. We are overtired, overstimulated, and overbooked. We're anxious. And we know deep in our hearts that something vital is missing, that something is wrong. But we're often too busy to attend to it or perhaps even to notice. "With the latest iOS updates," he said at one point with a wry smile, "it's easy to pretend that nothing could be wrong, that all is well with the world. What more could we possibly need?"

Fortunately, he didn't leave us there. He gave us clear, practical advice and proposed a way forward. And here's what he proposed: *Practice*. Practice silence, he suggested. Silence. Even just a few minutes of silence. But every day. And practice Sabbath, he suggested. No work, no email, no conference calls, no networking, just time for family and recreation and reflection. Can't pull it off for a whole day? That's OK. But practice. Try a few hours or a half-day. But do it regularly, once a week. Practice Sabbath rest. Practice it so that it becomes part of us, so that it becomes second-nature to us. Finally, practice simplicity, he suggested. Silence, Sabbath and Simplicity, he said. And what did he mean by simplicity? Well, in some ways that's the hardest of all for us, he said. Living fully and simply in the present moment. Being fully present to the one we're with, rather than noticing another across the room. Or looking at a screen. Acknowledging our age, accepting the real dimensions and limitations of our lives, our choices. Being honest with ourselves and living truthfully, resisting the twin lures of nostalgia and fantasy. Practice simplicity, he said.

And of course this is what Jesus is calling us to do today as he reawakens us yet again to the vibrant reality that God came 2000 years ago to be with us, that God indeed comes to be with again and again and again and always. This is great good news, he reminds us -- it's new life and redemption and joy, peace, freedom and release. But God's coming to us means nothing if we are not ready to receive him, if our hearts, as the old hymn puts it, are not ready to "prepare him room." And so he exhorts us in urgent tones to be ready, to see the fair horizon beyond the worries of this world, the anxieties, the fear and shame that keep us from living honestly and simply. The fear and anxiety that we dull and numb to make go away, only to find them there by our side once again, now stronger, now more well-rehearsed, now more part of us. Those don't need any more practice, he tells us. *Wake up*, he says, *wake up and be ready*. It's a message we hear over and over from him as he comes to us in love with God's message of kingdom liberation and restoration all in all. *Be ready*, he says, and the first step, he suggests, is to be truthful. Acknowledge and recognize our anxieties, the worries of this world, as the distractions that they are. And then begin to listen more simply and clearly for the voice of God.

I started reflecting on this passage a couple of weeks ago with today's sermon on a near horizon. I read the passage, thought I understood it, and was utterly distracted by about six things within about two minutes. I thought to myself, "I'm not ready." I imagine we'll all think this from time to time as this wonderful season unfolds, greeting us as it does each year with its bracing call out of anxiety, out of the worries of this world and into the brilliant, radiantly bright light of truth. Every moment of every day, Advent reminds us, is rich and ripe and full and fragrant with the chance to *prepare him room*, to receive the Christ, to hear God's voice in our midst. And how do we make ourselves ready? We so dearly wish there were another answer. But there isn't. We must practice. Silence, Sabbath, Simplicity. We must practice every day, even just a little bit. If our hearts are to prepare him room, we must first clear out a space, even just a little. And so our journey begins. We awaken, we put on the armor of light, and we make ourselves ready for him, in whose return is our light, our hope, our joy and our eternal salvation. Thanks be to God, Amen.