

1 Advent Sermon
November 27, 2011
The Reverend Kate Cress

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

When people are close to death, sometimes their last words are remembered, and even become famous. One of the Beatles, George Harrison, just moments before he died, said quite beautifully, "Love one another." The writer Oscar Wilde said, less beautifully, "Either this wallpaper goes, or I do." And I wonder if you've heard of a computer science professor named Randy Pausch, a young and outgoing family man diagnosed with pancreatic cancer? I saw him on 60 Minutes a while back. He became well known for what's called the Last

Lecture. He spoke to a room full of students, colleagues, friends and family, sharing with the crowd what he was learning about life... by being so close to death. He reminded his listeners never to lose their childlike wonder. He urged them to be grateful. Never to give up. He said, “Apologize when you screw up, and focus on other people, not yourself.” Not new ideas, but very, very powerful ones. Especially because they were among his last words.

When Apple guru Steve Jobs found he had cancer, he didn’t know how long he had to live. And although he didn’t give a “Last Lecture” like Randy Pausch, he did offer advice in a now-famous graduation speech. Starting with that classic line, “If you live each day as if it were your last, someday you’ll most certainly be right,” Steve Jobs explained how these words helped him know how to live. Each day, he would wonder, “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I’m about to do today? If the answer is ‘no’ too many days in a row,” he said, “I know I need to change something.”

Changing something if you need to – that’s crucial. Steve Jobs said, “Follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become.”

Today’s Gospel reading from Mark is what’s gotten me thinking about famous goodbyes, since it is one of the great goodbye speeches given by Jesus. Jesus knows that he does not have long to live. He’s actively challenging the authorities *and* traveling straight for Jerusalem, the seat of Roman power. Headed for almost certain arrest and death. Headed for execution. And so he wants to make absolutely sure that his disciples – and all of us – will know what to do when he is gone. That we understand our ‘marching orders.’

Of course we want to know our marching orders, so I wish this goodbye speech in Mark's Gospel were a little easier to understand. Many people believe Jesus is making a prophecy, telling us that he would come again at the end of the world, and how we'd better watch out, because some will be saved and others condemned. So keep alert, keep on your toes, stay awake and behave yourself so that when this end comes, you get chosen to survive. This assumes that at "the end," the world will be destroyed. And we're being frightened into good behavior.

But I believe "the end" Jesus talks about in today's reading means something VERY different. That "the end" means the end of *this age*, and the beginning of a *new time*, a new and better reality. A time when we manage to fulfill the dream God had for us in creation. I am sure that when God created the world and lovingly made humans, the last thing God wanted was for us to suffer and starve and fight constant wars. How we live – in so many ways – must be light years away from what God dreamed for us, dreams for us still. And so God sent Jesus to show in his life *and* death a living human example of God's dream for us. How we *could* live. And Jesus, knowing he had only a short time to live, tried to spell out for his disciples the way.

Again, this tricky passage has two possible meanings. One: the end is coming. Be good or you're in big trouble. The other, and this one sounds a lot more like Jesus to me: Yes, this current age will pass away and will be replaced by a new age, a better age, if we work together to make it happen. Jesus taught the disciples what to do. Love their enemies. Heal people. Resist evil. And by living this way they – and we today – can change the world. We can help usher in a

new age without hunger, without killing, without hatred. We have a role to play in creating this new age.

Lots of cults down through the centuries have thought they had it figured out that the world would come to an end on a certain date at a certain time.

Members have sold or given away all their earthly possessions and waited and nothing has happened. They've waited for the "end" instead of doing what Jesus calls us to do: participate in building a new *beginning*. Again and again, Jesus tells his listeners to "keep alert," "keep awake," for the Son of Man will come again. Easy enough to believe in the weeks and months right after Jesus died. Jesus' first followers expected this "new age" any minute. Paul didn't even bother getting married – no time! Two thousand years later, we've stopped holding our breath, but we know from Jesus' words that he never promised an exact time or moment for his return. In fact, he said, "...about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." All we know is that we play a part in it all and we need to stay awake and alert and alive to this amazing new creation that is coming to pass, this new world that we are helping to create.

Remember how Steve Jobs said, "Follow your heart and intuition. They somehow *already know* what you truly want to become." Randy Pausch, Steve Jobs – facing death, these men see the truth so clearly. See the time we waste on selfishness and foolish grudges, afraid to take risks, afraid to live fully. And the *real* living, the deep down living we have it in us to live, it's all there, inside us waiting to be activated. We are made by God to live out God's plan for the unfolding of the universe, and we can do it if we listen – every day – to God's voice instead of our own. The "heart and intuition," to use Steve Jobs words,

that's another way of saying God's voice *in us*. We can choose to follow that voice, that holy intuition, or not. To listen or not. We have freedom – look around at the world as it is right now and that much is clear! But following God's voice, 'heart and intuition,' we know when we meet people living this way. People following their *true* path, the path engrained in us, encoded, wired in from the beginning. We know them because they are so alive.

In today's farewell by Jesus, he tells us to stay awake and alert to God's voice and our own true purpose SO THAT we can help build the world God dreamed for us from the foundation of the world. The world Jesus came to tell us about. And the world Jesus comes *again* to create – *with* us and *in* us – now *and* in the time to come.

Advent begins today, the season of hope and expectation. Keep alive and alert and awake this season to the new beginning promised by God, and how you can join in making it happen. Because Jesus is coming, and Jesus is already here. **Amen.**