

It looks like big changes may be on the horizon. After winning the Presidency and maintaining majorities in both houses of Congress, the election a few weeks ago should enable Republicans to dictate policy. Will the wall the President-elect said he would build along the Mexican border actually be constructed? If so, who will pay for it? How many undocumented immigrants will be deported in the next four years? For answers to these and other questions raised by the election, we'll just have to wait to see what happens.

Of course, this is not the first time that tensions about immigrants have been an issue in American politics. As James McPherson wrote in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Battle Cry of Freedom*: "Immigration during the first five years of the 1850s reached a level five times greater than a decade earlier. Most of the new arrivals were poor Catholic peasants or laborers from Ireland and Germany... Crime and welfare costs soared... Native-born Americans attributed these increases to immigrants, especially the Irish, whose arrest rate and share of relief funds were several times their percentage of the population."<sup>1</sup>

As a result, members of a secret fraternal society "pledged to vote for no one except native-born Protestants for public office... When asked by outsiders about the Order, members were to respond 'I know nothing.' Because of their secrecy and tight-knit organization, these 'Know Nothings' became a potentially powerful voting bloc."<sup>2</sup>

Back then as things turned out, the United States also was facing immense change. But it wasn't change caused by immigrants who came here voluntarily to seek a better life. The change that was coming was due to an internal conflict whose seeds were sown in 1619 when the first African slaves were brought to America. The issue was left unresolved when the United States became a nation. In 1855, the Civil War in all its gory horror was only five years away.

Being ready for tremendous change while knowing nothing about when or how it will happen is a theme in today's Gospel. Jesus speaks about the coming of the Son of Man. This event commonly is referred to as the Second Coming, although that term does not appear in the Bible. The change will be cataclysmic, the end of the world as we know it. "But about that day and hour no one knows," says Jesus, "neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

And so with these foreboding words the church begins a new year. On the first

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1 James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 131.

2 *Ibid*, p. 135.

Sunday of Advent, four weeks to the day before Christmas, we find ourselves eons away from sweet baby Jesus sleeping peacefully in the Bethlehem hay. Instead, we are jolted into reflecting on the end times.

Today also, we switch from reading Luke's Gospel to reading from the Gospel according to Matthew for a year. Isn't it odd that we begin our reading of Matthew not at its very beginning (which as the governess Maria in *The Sound of Music* taught the Von Trapp children is a very good place to start), but in chapter 24 of a book that has 28 chapters? Who in the world came up with that idea?

You can blame it on the theologians and Bible scholars who developed our lectionary. But don't jump to the conclusion that they were all Lutherans - they weren't. We don't read from a uniquely Lutheran schedule of Bible readings. We use the same basic lectionary as many other denominations like Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. The lectionary Catholics use is similar. Maybe beginning our reading of Matthew near the end of his Gospel illustrates a point made by Lutheran pastor and seminary professor Dr. Mark Allen Powell. Many of us heard Dr. Powell during Sunday School as we viewed his DVD series *How Lutherans Interpret the Bible*. Powell said that if you happen to be a theologian or a Bible scholar, you probably are a nerd.

I suppose it is nerdy only four weeks away from Christmas to be thinking about the end times. And certainly it is nerdy to begin reading a book in its 24<sup>th</sup> chapter. But be that as it may, today's Gospel reading is a very timely one.

Three days ago, we celebrated Thanksgiving. This marked the beginning of the great season of holiday feasting that stretches to Christmas and beyond it to New Year's Day, college football's many bowl games, the Super Bowl, and Mardi Gras. Yes, once again, it's time to fatten up, people!

This, says Jesus, is what people were doing in the days of Noah before the great flood came. They were eating, drinking, getting married, and partying as if there were no tomorrow right up until they didn't have another tomorrow. They knew nothing about what was coming down until the flood came. So Jesus warns his disciples to keep awake: "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

This, too, is a timely message after Thanksgiving when so many of us have become drowsy. Often it is blamed on tryptophan - as if turkeys have an inordinate amount of this amino acid that makes us sleepy. Actually, it seems not to be the fault of the turkey, but the loads of carbohydrates along with the protein in turkey or any meat. In other words, it's the overindulgence more than anything.

But Jesus is not railing against gluttony or any other of the classical seven deadly sins. There's no judgment in this reading against people's activities - what they are eating and drinking, how much of it they are consuming, whom they are marrying, or what kind of work they are doing. As one commentator has written: "They are not condemned for gross sinfulness. They are judged, rather, for settling too comfortably into business as usual. They seem resigned in their assumption that nothing will change, at least not soon. This assumption brings with it the risk of accepting politics as usual, of accepting lies as truth, of complacency in the face of injustice, of recklessly blaming victims and outsiders. Such a mindset often leaves us completely unaware of the precariousness of our position. So our Advent texts serve their purpose. They shock us out of our complacency, wake us up from our resignation to the status quo."<sup>3</sup>

Cataclysmic change, says Jesus, will come about while people are engaged in common, everyday activities. It's more a matter of awareness, or the lack of it - of sleepwalking through life as though things will go on the way they have been going indefinitely.

Through the efforts of Pastor Charlie Bowker and Jack Edwards, a new small group has begun at St. Andrew called the Bookmen. For our first book to read and discuss, we chose *The Aviators* by Winston Groom. This book is about three men, Eddie Rickenbacker, Charles Lindbergh, and Jimmy Doolittle, who influenced the history of aviation from World War I through World War II and beyond. All three loomed large as heroes in their day - but none more so than Lindbergh early in his career.

In 1919, a \$25,000 prize was offered to the first aviator or aviators to fly nonstop between New York and Paris. The prize went unclaimed until 1927 when Lindbergh succeeded. Lindbergh's courage, humility, shyness, and charm made the handsome 25-year-old aviator an instant international celebrity. Several years later he married Anne Morrow, a daughter of the United States ambassador to Mexico.

It wasn't long before Anne and Charles welcomed a baby boy into their lives, Charles Augustus Lindbergh, Jr. Twenty months later one night, less than a month after the family had moved into their new six-bedroom home, tragedy struck. Around ten o'clock, the nursemaid discovered that little Charlie was not in his crib, so she went to see if he was with one of his parents. He wasn't. Soon they learned someone had used a ladder to enter the baby's bedroom upstairs through a window and had taken the toddler with them. At the time, it was said to be the crime of the century.

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin Chinn, "Living by The Word: Reflections on the Lectionary" in *The Christian Century*, November 9, 2016, p. 20.

Charles Lindbergh was transformed into an international hero as the first person to fly nonstop across the Atlantic. Now an evil cataclysm had transformed the lives of Charles and Anne as their first child was kidnapped and later found dead.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks to the theme of our not knowing for a fourth time: "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." Jesus concludes that we need to be ready because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

We try to be ready for unexpected changes. That's why we buy insurance. But there's no way anyone can be prepared for everything that might happen.

Speaking to a group of abolitionists in 1852, Wendell Phillips famously said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." That idea, however, did not originate with him, but can be traced back to an author named Thomas Charlton in 1809. Charlton wrote a biography about a man named James Jackson. James Jackson was a Revolutionary War general who was elected to the First United States Congress in 1789 and who nine years later became the governor of Georgia.<sup>4</sup>

Today on the First Sunday of Advent, Jesus challenges his disciples to be eternally vigilant. Since no one knows when the end will be and when Jesus will return, we need to be ready for cataclysmic changes at any moment. Eternal vigilance not only is the price of liberty, it also is the cost of discipleship. The promise of Christ coming again is meant to jolt us out of a drowsy unconsciousness and comfortable numbness to what is going on around us. Advent calls us to face the implications of God's presence with us - not only in the changes and chances of history, but also in the ordinary events of our lives.

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4 Thomas Charlton, from *Wikipedia* article found with search for "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."