

Sermon: The Day is Coming

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Nov. 27, 2022, Advent 1)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The 1999 movie Matrix, first of a three-part science fiction trilogy, depicts a horrifying future of apocalyptic struggle between humans and intelligent machines. Humanity, on the losing end, finds itself unknowingly trapped inside the Matrix, a virtual reality world that the machines have created to distract the humans from realizing the ugly truth, that their bodies are trapped in cells, being used as an energy source, like batteries.

The main character, Thomas Anderson, works as a computer programmer while inside the Matrix, who also moonlights as a hacker under the alias 'Neo'. In the opening scenes, we see Neo dozing off in front of his computer. All the sudden the screen lights up in a classic and nostalgic green hue. Words begin to appear as if someone is typing them real-time from the other end, reading "Wake up, Neo...The Matrix has you."

Mr. Anderson / Neo wakes from his slumber, rubs the fatigue out of his eyes, stares at the screen with a puzzled expression forming on his face, as he continues to read what's on the screen, "Follow the white rabbit...Knock, Knock, Neo." At precisely that moment, Neo jumps from seat as he hears loud knocking coming from his front door. It was a brilliant cinematic moment, in an action-filled blockbuster that turned out to be an instant cult-classic. If you haven't seen that movie, you really should because it might just change how you see the world.

Speaking of the world, do you ever get the same feeling that the world as we currently live in is not real? It is a world turned upside down. Thanksgiving holiday kicks off with Black Friday, enticing us to search for ever cheaper deals. The season of Advent inevitably leads us towards the Christmas shopping season, a make-or-break time for most retailers counting their profitability for the year. How about the story of the birth of Jesus Christ playing second fiddle to the story that most kids are truly excited about, that is Santa Claus living in the North Pole coming to shower gifts to well-behaving children. All the while the world is facing pandemics, social unrest, starvation in Haiti, war in Ukraine, runaway inflation caused

by corporate greed, and the impending environmental doom due to the already uncontrollable CO2 emission.

I am still haunted by the voice of that 16yr old environmental activist Greta Thunberg, speaking before the United Nation in 2019, “How dare you! Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

As we walk into this 1st Sunday of Advent, we all need to be jolted by a wake up call! We all need to come to this realization that the world we live in currently, is a bad dream. If we truly are to live in hope in this season of Advent, we all need to first, wake up from this bad dream! Thereby seeing there is another world, another reality that is here but yet to come, and I am speaking of the coming Kingdom of God. It is a kingdom of light, of justice, of compassion, of equality, of love, and a kingdom of peace. However, for that kingdom to be realized, this current world we find ourselves must first be judged, in the coming Day of the Lord.

The Day of the Lord has a rich and widely varied tradition in the Bible. It is a term most frequently found in the prophetic literature, in certain sections of the Gospel, and of course in the book of Revelation. It is most often used by biblical writers referring to a specific event in which Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, intervenes in human affairs, in order to save and to judge. These interventions could come in time of wars, or upheavals, or natural disasters, or great cataclysmic events. Those who are against God, or those whom God is against, would inevitably not fare well. Even those who ultimately benefit from God’s intervention, may still have to endure to survive through the ordeal.

Take for example Isaiah chapter 2, in today’s reading, which only covers the first part of the Day of the Lord. If one was to continue reading the rest of the chapter, one would come to see a fuller picture of destruction, so universal that people would have no choice but to hide in caves. Take another example in Revelation chapter 6:14-16, when the sixth seal is broken, everyone, including kings, rulers, generals, slave and free all hid in caves, calling out to mountains and rocks to,

“Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:14-16)

Who is able to stand indeed! When is that day coming? No one knows! In the Gospel reading today, of Matthew 24:37-39, Jesus clearly states that,

“For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in the 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.” (Matthew 24:37-39)

The point that Jesus wants to stress, is for us to make ready for the Day of the Lord, in each and every aspect of our lives, in what we say and in what we do. For when the day comes, it would be entirely unexpected, as many will be caught in total surprise.

Wanting to bold font and underscore this unexpectedness, Jesus goes on to illustrate in verse 40-41,

"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." (Matthew 24:40-41)

‘The Rapture’ is the term used by theologians to describe those taken up, supposedly to heaven, thus escaping the imminent calamities that will surely befall those left behind.

‘Left Behind’ is also the name of a popular book and TV series in 1995, portraying the struggles of those left on earth, to deal with the apocalypse, and in search of a possible final redemption. I recall vividly one of its opening scenes, of an empty church where the entire congregation was raptured up, except for one. The pastor of that church was left behind. Evidently, he was such a convincing preacher of the gospel that all his parishioners believed, except him. So the pastor found himself alone in the pulpit and down on his knees, praying and beseeching God to forgive his unbelief. That scene has always hit me in a strange way, as a reminder to myself, to believe in what I preach, and to preach only what I truly believe in.

The point that Jesus is making is urging his followers to take their lives and their faith seriously, for the day of judgement is coming. It is coming unexpectedly, subversively, turning the world up-side-down,

shattering existing power structures, and installing a new world whereby we shall all walk in the way of the Lord. Hallelujah, come O Lord. Come!

If you turn to the front of the bulletin, you will find an inspirational image of a bronze sculpture by the esteemed Soviet artist Evgeniy Vuchetich, titled "Let Us Beat Swords Into Ploughshares". The sculpture depicts the figure of a man, holding a hammer aloft in one hand and a sword in the other, about to hammer that bent sword into a tool used to till land. It represent man's desire to put an end to war and transform weapons of destruction into tools benefiting all humankind. The actual sculpture is now sitting on the ground of the United Nations. It was presented to the UN by delegates from the Soviet Union in the year 1959, at the height of the Cold War. It is strangely comforting, at least for me, to know that even when Superpowers were preparing to nuke each other and the world into oblivion, some were envisioning a better and brighter future.

The sculpture is evidently inspired by the passage in Isaiah 2:1-5, with this open invitation to all, which I shall proclaim, on this first Sunday of Advent, the Advent of hope (from the King James Version of the Bible).

*"And many people shall go and say,
Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths:
for out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

*And he shall judge among the nations,
and shall rebuke many people:
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruninghooks:
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.
O house of Jacob, come ye,
and let us walk in the light of the Lord." (Isaiah 2:1-5, KJV)*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.