

Sermon “Giving God Dad’s Slippers”
November 30, 2025
First Sunday of Advent
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At the age of 72, Michelangelo began work on The Deposition, a sculpture which depicts Christ’s body being taken down from the cross but things didn’t go so smoothly. It is said that Michelangelo complained of a material flaw in the marble that made construction near-impossible, though we know the artist was good at selecting his stone.

Scholars now point to the possibility that something in the composition itself—perhaps Christ’s leg, thrown over the Virgin Mary’s lap, which could have been read as suggestive—led the sculptor to attack his piece with a hammer after eight years of work. Though the work was saved by a church official and partially restored, Christ’s missing left leg betrays Michelangelo’s violent outburst.

Have you ever done something similar or at least had the temptation to destroy something you started? For the artists or crafters out there does a project start out so poorly that you’ve just got to rip it up and start over. Or even something so simple as building a Lego tower with a child or grandchild and it just isn’t coming out right so you break it apart and start over?

In our gospel this morning, Jesus reminds us of a time when God felt the same way. During the days of Noah, God had become so distressed and so saddened by the destruction and decay of creation that God had decided to destroy the earth completely. What the people took to be their ordinary lives was in fact a state of extreme *itzavon* — alienation.

The Biblical commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes that this alienation had “intensified to the point where it became unbearable and God felt driven to obliterate this rather disappointing world project.

When Jesus refers back to this passage in Genesis, he seems to suggest that his listeners haven’t learned much from the time of Noah. And it wouldn’t be hard for us to make a similar argument today that we’re still going about our business in the same way, as if we had some claim on the future, as if we were oblivious to the effects of climate change, heightening international tensions, increasing unpredictable world leaders.

So if I had a device that could measure your state of alienation right now, like a blood pressure meter on your finger, what would it read? Any of us might be experiencing alienation in a relationship: spouse, parent, child, friend, neighbor. There is the alienation for some of living in an increasingly non-religious world. But we can also see it closer to home. I read a report of the last Mt. Blue School Board meeting on Nov. 18 and what I took away was that the meeting was split into two large groups of the over 200 attendees and neither side could even fathom how the other side thought the way they did or said what they said. That's alienation! But what do we do about it?

The answer Jesus gave was for us all to be “ready”, to “watch”, which are the keywords for this first week of Advent. But ready for what? What was missing in Noah's time was an identification with God's consciousness, the future that was foreseen, and of which the present is always already a part. People simply acted as though life would always be “business as usual.”

In this climate, Noah was an anomaly. A non-sailor, he nevertheless built a boat 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high—miles from the sea, and without seeing a cloud in the sky to prompt him. His true blueprint and pattern was faith, a trust in God that being awake was the key to preparedness for what was to come.

The next illustration Jesus uses is that of suddenness and surprise as he describes two theoretical situations, one set in a field and another in a mill, in which two labor together—but in which “one is taken and the other left”. Recent interpretations see this in light of the concept of the “rapture”, when the true believers will be swept up into the sky like Dorothy and Toto heading out of Kansas. This makes the lucky ones those who are taken. But if interpreted in light of Noah and the flood, the lucky ones are those on the ark, those kept safe, who after the flood must get on with the work of rebuilding and restoration. They are the ones who are ready and awake.

Then there is the final image Jesus uses: God is imagined as no less than a thief, breaking into our houses. God is not safe. This flies in the face of so much of our culture. As people start their Advent calendars today or tomorrow, children hoping to find that piece of chocolate, adults that mini-bottle of wine, or maybe all looking for a lovely new Christmas ornament, what if instead you opened that door and found the Joker or Penguin, or your garden-variety local drug addict looking to break into your house to finance his next hit or worse!

“For this reason,” Jesus says, “be ready.” What does it mean to be ready? Ready to meet God at the door with a baseball bat? Endlessly reading the news hoping to finally master the

future? Up all night with our fears and anxieties eating us alive? Chewing on the future until our stomachs turn acid?

The poet Ross Gay advises that in our pursuit of joy we not lock ourselves up against sorrow. He writes, "I am advocating, and adamantly so ... that we lay down our swords and invite sorrow in. I'm suggesting we make sorrow some tea from the lemon balm in the garden... We give sorrow our dad's slippers that we've hung on to for fifteen years for just this occasion. And we drape our murdered buddy's scarf over sorrow's shoulders, to warm them up some. We wedge some wood in the fire. As we're refilling their tea we notice sorrow is drinking from a mug given to us by someone we've hurt."

And let's take our imagination one step further and invite the God of the future in. Replacing the word "sorrow" in those images with the word "God". So God wears dad's slippers, and God drinks tea from the mug given us by somebody we've hurt. And as we begin to invite God in, perhaps we begin to overcome our alienation, the condition of *itzavon*. We restart conversations we've ended. We remember things we had forgotten or repressed. We acknowledge what we've lost and what life has cost us, but even as we acknowledge that, we also extend ourselves forward. We become awake to the complexity and grace of the moment as we forgive God the intrusion into our well-planned worlds. Perhaps we greet the thief in the night with tea and slippers.

Advent then in the Christian tradition is the practice of being ready to welcome God at each and every moment, dismantling our defenses, becoming aware of the moment's possibilities, and using the opportunity to become awake to the grace of the ordinary.