First Congregational Church
November 30, 2025
First Sunday in Advent
Matthew 24:36-44
"Perspectives"
Rev. Dinah Haag, preaching

It is no secret that I usually begin sermons with a joke or two, and while that will not be the case this morning, some may think it is, at least in the beginning. Long ago and far away, between the years 700 and 1800 AD, the people of northern Norway made their living as fisher people. In the winter they caught stockfish, a general term like panfish, meaning sunfish, perch, crappies, bass, etc. Stockfish includes ling fish, sometimes called lingcod or burbot, torsk, and most important of all, cod.

They would clean the fish, using the tail as a sort of clothespin, then set them in the open air on wooden racks for wind and weather drying from February until May. At that point the fish would be graded into 20 different categories - sort of like beef or eggs are graded, then stacked into crates and sent to exotic places like Spain, Portugal, Italy, Brazil, Ghana and Nigeria. Soaking or boiling in water alone can't reconstitute the lowest grade, called lutefisk, so it's soaked in lye - yes, the very same thing used to clean drains and explodes when it comes in contact with aluminum.

Over there at smithsonianmag.com, they remind us that lye is the same chemical that gives pretzels that deep, shiny brown, cures fresh olives for eating, and is what makes bagels gleam. It's just that those foods just don't advertise this fact like lutefisk does.

After multiple rinse cycles, lutefisk is usually boiled, where it comes out opaque white and a little giggley, not quite as much as jello with a fat-like texture. Not being able to spend the time to discover how those exotic places consumme their stockfish, in Minnesota, there are two camps: with butter or cream sauce. There are some squirrley folks who eat it with a mustard sauce, but they are few and far between. An now you all understand why Swedish meatballs came into being.

I set this context for you so that you are able to get an appreciation for the undertaking that transpired when Church Basement Lutefisk Feeds were as much a part of the fabric of churches as a Scandinavian bazaar, a fall market or a Silver Tea.

Somewhere in the past, I came across the planning list of one such Feed for 1200 people. It would take 600 pounds of lutefisk - not sure if that would be dried or reconstituted, 400 pounds of meatballs, 116 pounds of butter, 600 pounds of potatoes, 276 - not 275 - but 276 cans of corn, 40 gallons of coleslaw, 40 quarts of dill pickles, 20 quarts of beet pickles - for color on the plate, 600 pieces of lefse, 20 loaves of rye bread (for the

Swedes) 60 dozen buns, 3,500 cups of coffee, and between 5,000 and 6,000 Scandinavian cookies such as krum-kaka, spritz, and so on. This is not a ploy to switch the Silver Tea to a Lutefisk Feed, but if we did, at least we'd have a starting point.

I give you this context to help make the point that it is sometimes easier to understand things when you can compare them to something else. When someone asks what our church is like, I'll often ask if they ever went to church, and then I can describe basic differences and similarities based on their experiences. On this first Sunday of a new church calendar year, perhaps getting a wiff of the differences between the calendar 'years' might make our scripture passage a little more understandable.

The church calendar runs from the first Sunday in Advent to the last Sunday after Pentecost, repeating every three years. With outstanding creativity, these years are called A, B and C. As we just finished Year C last week, we logically begin Year A today.

The lectionary people made it a little easier, in that Year A focuses on Matthew, Year B on Mark, Year C on Luke - Matthew, Mark, Luke - and the last gospel of John gets sprinked through out all of them. Going in reverse for a moment, having just finished Year C, it was all about God's compassion and concern for the marginalized. Mark was the "no grass under his feet guy", becasue everything was about the immediacy of discipleship and Jesus as a suffering servant. Matthew's big deal is Jesus being the fulfillment of all the prophecies and a teacher in God's kingdom.

Matthew 24:36-44 Judy Welch

36 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Thank you, Judy, I think. What a way to begin a new church year. You better watch out, you better not cry. (Sorry. Couldn't resist.)

The writer wasn't named, but over at sermons.com, it was brought up that today is not just a new year, but a new season, as we are all aware, the Advent of Christ. Advent, in my brain, has been about this four week season of preparing for Christ's arrival to human kind. But it can be the advent of television, or the emergence or materialization of something new. A dawning or surfacing. So the question was asked, "What are you getting ready for?" The end of the world as some religious cults are prone to do? Perhaps it is "economic first-degree murder" – murdering bank accounts? (That was the writer's idea.)

I was struck at the gutsy black and white of the question: Are we getting ready for the depression, the anxiety, and even the rage that accompanies the secular holiday season? In one last nod to the grim, the author pointed out the apparent: we can easily find that instead of preparing to sing "O Holy Night" we will find ourselves living out one holy nightmare.

While we might appreciate the clever lines, the truth is that there are more people than we could know who are struggling - maybe in your pew, quite likely in the same block where you live, very definitely in the village or burg where you abide. Looking around, we might empathize with those who would wish the pressures away with a "dash away, dash away, dash away all".

One of my favorite shows as a kid was Gomer Pyle, USMC. I just thought it was funny, but the show was actually a great display of accepting surprises, expecting the best from people and putting a positive spin on unmet expectations. Sargent Vince Carter was, of course, 180 degrees opposite of Gomer's demeanor. Relishing order, tidiness and predictability, Sgt. Carter would do everything in his power to avoid even good suprises.

The sermon title, "Perspectives" isn't the best one, but it was conceived way back on Wednesday, so perphaps there is a bit of forgiveness that can be found, because a better title might be "wonder", as in, I wonder what the lectionary people were thinking assigning this passage for a new year. Or maybe the word amazement might be a better title in being amazed that such a far reaching, other-worldly passage would be inspiration to any of us in the beginning of a season that posits wants againt desires - materially, time-wise and any other manner.

Except, maybe it is more appropriate than other passages that might seem more practical, like a couple verses from Ecclesiastes (8:14-15). Speaking on the topic of wisdom, the writer wrote, "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. 15 So I commend the enjoyment of

life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun."

Except that we all know that is not real wisdom. There is more to life than eating, drinking and being merry, and I'm sorry if that is sad news for anyone. In fact, such a view point is immensely narrow and closed off. With such navel-gazing comes every possiblity that the astounding and precious moments will be missed.

It takes some discipline to "keep watch", as Matthew urges. It is so understandable, at this time of year, to walk with head down to watch for black ice and slippery snow flakes. But we can stop momentarily, look up and be reminded of the beauty, the grandeur, the greater realms that not only lie before us but are a part of life at this very moment.

None of us know of the day when Christ will return, and in my own opinion, I don't think it likely that God would take one half of God's own and not the other half. But I do think that in this Advent season, while we are preparing for what is to come, there is much to see and much to feed our souls. In keeping an 'eye to the sky' - so to speak, we can catch those glimpses of greed and violence taking the back seat as we become more attuned to how they hurt and how they can be healed.

Watching closely, we begin to see those places where grace is born and restoration takes root again. And who wouldn't want to witness such sacred moments? They may appear in an apology, a prayer, a gesture of welcome, a conversation seeking understanding — a myriad of ways. Yet if we are not watchful, we miss them. It isn't that overlooking these holy moments is a sin or some terrible failing, but rather that, as human beings, we are so much more fully ourselves when we catch those fleeting glimpses of the divine. And that seems like a mighty good place to pray.

Holy God, you come to us quietly — in light and shadow, in word and silence, in gestures of mercy and moments of grace. Continue to teach us to watch for you, to discover the births of grace and restoration. Nudge us to catch the thousand small advents of Your love that surround us each and every moment of each and every day. Help us not get caught up in the web of woulda, shoulda and coulda, but help others see the advents when our hearts are attuned to Your coming among us. Awaken us, Lord, to recognize you in our midst — and make our watching holy as all your people say, Amen.