

November 27, Advent 1A (Romans 13:11–14; Matthew 24:36–44)

We can recognize ourselves in the messy people around Jesus.

by [Martha Spong](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

I was 12 when my family went to the wedding of the neighborhood girl who babysat me when I was little. Her father was a longtime partner in my dad's law firm, but the guests skewed more to extended family than to people I knew, and the reception was a little boring for me—so I started daydreaming. I was surprised when my unfailingly polite parents suddenly hustled our family out the door rather than making the rounds one more time to offer appreciation for the hospitality. My dad had perceived an intoxicated squabble breaking out between the bride's uncles, which we later learned ended in fisticuffs.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus has warned his disciples of turmoil to come, and now he is letting them know what to expect even farther into the future. He tells them he will be back, but he doesn't offer the tone of assurance we might want. The Son of man is coming . . . but at an unexpected hour. Not even he knows when.

It's meant to make us sit at the edge of our seats, which seems a little strange as we begin a church season most of us will have planned down to the last detail, from the grocery lists to the postal deadlines to the best day to hang outdoor lights. We know when Jesus will appear on Christmas Eve, at the appointed hour listed on the calendar in the church newsletter, right after we light the candles.

There were candles at my brother-in-law's wedding, in a beautiful dark sanctuary, on an autumn afternoon. What there wasn't was anyone to watch my toddler. He sat with the grandparents while I gave a reading early in the service, but as soon as I was finished, the bride's aunt showed me to the unfamiliar basement nursery (also dark). My little guy and I waited out the rest of the ceremony, and I listened for signs that the service might be over. Would I be able to hear the organ above us? I had no idea.

The disciples have come to Jesus with a private question. When will he be coming back? They have no idea. Experienced at explaining things to this cohort, Jesus knows to tell them twice. He describes how it will be. People will go along eating, drinking, and marrying, working in the field and in the home, living from milestone to chore, but nobody knows when the end will come. The disciples don't ask the obvious question, so let me ask it for them: How can we be ready?

Paul offers guidelines for alertness to the Romans. He takes eating, drinking, and marrying to their extremes, warning against reveling and licentiousness and calling them to his virtuous ideal. But Jesus, I think, means something different. He is telling us that we won't know the timing in advance, but we can prepare ourselves to be awake to the moment when it comes. He is speaking to the people who followed him at his first invitation. They caught an inkling or a sign of who he was, and they can model that receptivity for others.

The first of my children to marry was the second son, and with his bride he chose the church where my children grew up and where I was ordained. We traveled across the country and the world for a long weekend in Portland, Maine, where we rented an eccentric Airbnb for eight. Across those days the first adult rite of passage of the next generation met our quotidian nostalgia for Mister Bagel and the Holy Donut and the Lobster Shack at Two Lights. My children and I craved those sense memories of the last place we had all lived together; we emanated love for familiar flavors and aromas and landscapes. We hoped our significant others would embrace the old-fashioned favorites as they embraced us.

People are messy. We get out of hand at weddings, or forget to arrange child care, or take for granted that other people will love what we love as much as we love it. We can recognize ourselves in the people around Jesus, the ones he talked with over dinner or struck up conversations with on the road; they wished for a cosmic calendar just as we do. Without one, just like them, we don't know what we don't know. Yet we can practice being attentive to hints and glimmers, watching the people around us, listening for what we cannot yet hear, and inviting others to come along with us.

How can we be awake for him? The key is being open. Whether the day is commonplace or a watershed, we can be on the lookout for signs that Jesus is in it with us.