Sermon for December 1, 2019  
Sam Bardwell  
Matthew 24:36-44  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
Romans 13:11-14

Dear siblings in Christ, My name is Sam Bardwell. It is a joy to worship with you today! And it is also a particular pleasure this morning to introduce our new altar and lectern into the sanctuary. I am a member of the Worship Table here at Our Saviour’s and I was the liaison between the church and John Preus, the artist who made these pieces.

The commissioning of these pieces intentionally coincides with the 150th anniversary of this church. And now with these new furnishings we head into a new season. Ready or not, Advent is here! The theme for this year’s Advent season is “Christ our Hope.” And I, for one, need Christ badly to help me embody this theme because, when I look at our world, Hope is not forthcoming. It is quite easy for me to connect with the Gospel writer’s sense of an impending apocalypse.

If I were to glean an overarching call to action from today’s texts it would be this: stay awake and worship God. As Christians then our call is in sharp contrast to the dominant refrain of the Empire—the social and political powers of our day. In these High Holy days of Consumption the dominant refrain is, “Celebrate, Consume, Repeat. Celebrate, Consume, Repeat.”

Today two new pieces of liturgical artwork will become a living part of our worship. John incorporated salvaged wood to carefully patch and bind together this altar. The inlaid oak shards you will see as you become familiar with the altar (and I encourage everyone to take time to get to know it) were collected from the site of the Highway 55 reroute in South Minneapolis. This reroute marked a victory for the forces of Empire over local Creation Care activists. But that is not the full story.

In our readings Jesus and Paul experienced another Empire in the form of the Romans and their merciless Path of Progress. The Roman Empire, too, was insatiable in its appetite to possess. They were famous for their unrivaled Department of Transportation and the efficiency of their roads. Anything (or anyone) resisting the way of their Progress was crushed.

This very altar connects us to the prophetic story of those who resisted the Highway 55 Reroute. On August 10th, 1998, a group of Native American activists and local allies put themselves in the path of a proposed reroute of Highway 55. Responding with the kind urgency that the Gospel writer and Paul implore us to exercise, they occupied the vast swath of land set aside for the reroute. At the center of this occupation was a stand of four bur oaks that came to be known as “The Four Oaks.”

What Caesar will tell you is that an illegal occupation sprouted up around a stand of trees that stood on government land. A number of people and trees were removed from the land in order to make way for the Highway 55 reroute.
Jim Anderson, (or Red Sky as he was known in his Mendota Dakota Mdewakanton Community) proclaimed something different. He described his people’s ancient and embodied relationship to the “Four Oaks” this way: “When people pass into the spirit world, our people put their bodies in trees, come back a year later, and whatever’s left they bury it there. They buried them in what they call Taku Wakan Tipi, “The Gathering Place,” or where the spirits dwell…and the Four Trees were on the edge of it.”

The diverse coalition of Native American activists and local allies occupied the land, camping out in the trees, often locking themselves to trunks in what became the longest urban land occupation in U.S. history.

“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…”

I got to speak with Joe Hesla, one of many activists who did volunteer patrols at the encampment watching out for thieves. He described the experience as very moving but also “apocalyptic.” The thieves from the City’s demolition crews were looking for any moment of non-wakefulness when they could posses and destroy the buildings and trees where the resistors were camping out.

16 months later Caesar and the Department of Transportation won. The protesters were cleared by mass arrest. Highway 55 was rerouted. According to his obituary, Red Sky passed into the spirit world on June 27 of this year…but his vision and leadership live on. His spirit lives on.

Jim Anderson and the other resistors sowed seeds of Creation Care that we are all called to nurture. Direct actions and occupations continue as a vital tool for those committed to Creation Care and Restorative Justice. Inspired by a similar sense of our sacred and created Earth, some members from our own congregation went to resist the Dakota Access Pipeline a few years ago. And though Jim Anderson’s spiritual tradition differs from ours in many respects there are also many points of connection, including a sense of the Spirit alive in Creation and a certain reverence for trees.

As Christians, the word we use for the third person of the Trinity is Spirit. In Hebrew, the language of Isaiah and the Psalmist, it is Ruach and in Greek, the language of the first century Christian church, it is Pneuma. Both ruach and pneuma also mean breath. One reason we cherish trees so much is their capacity to breathe. The leaves of trees pull in carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (which would be poisonous to us if the trees did not process it) and, as a by-product, the trees release oxygen. We need tree breath in order to breathe.

Trees also store this carbon dioxide in their fibers, helping to clean the air and reduce CO2’s negative effects on our environment. The vitality of trees’ breath is relatively well known and often invoked as a defense of forests by environmentalists.

But what is less well known is that the so-called death of a tree does not stop its breath, or end its life. Wood is hygroscopic. This means that it breathes. Even after it has been chopped down and severed from its leaves and roots, the stage we tend to regard as a tree’s death, the harvested wood still breathes—whether it becomes lowly mulch in your garden or a door for your threshold. You know that door is still breathing because in the winter it opens with ease but in the summer, when the air it breathes is humid and full of moisture, it expands and sticks when you try to open it.
Today, at the start of Advent, we are called to breathe into a sacred tension between celebrating 150 years of growth together and anticipating the birth of Jesus, that new shoot off of David’s branch, who warns us of an apocalyptic future. Apocalyptic, by the way, comes from the Greek word meaning “to reveal” but in Christian contexts apocalyptic commonly refers to End Times, as in: “What would you do if you knew the world would end tomorrow?”

Because of human interference trees regularly face their own form of apocalypses through disease, removal, or accident. Then again we, as humans, face disease and accidents, too. And perhaps we can learn something from trees about how to face such mini apocalypses, such seemingly life-ending circumstances. What do trees do in the face of an apocalypse? They keep breathing. Breathe in the cloud of toxins around you and breathe out the refreshed Spirit of God.

And because there are times when life just feels like we are moving from apocalypse to apocalypse and because we cannot know when it will be the last apocalypse, I would like to take a few moments to practice facing some potential apocalypses together. Will you lend me your spirits, your breath? Inhale and exhale with me, if you will:

(Inhale)
(Exhale)

Please keep breathing. Let’s do something radical. Let’s just breathe together for a few moments. Whatever brought you here today you are here now, rooted in God’s presence. You are where you need to be. You know everything you need to know. All there is to do is breathe as one body.

(Inhale)
(Exhale)
(Inhale) Our climate is in Crisis
(Exhale) “Christ is our Hope”
(Inhale) Our political system is broken
(Exhale) “Christ is our Hope”
(Inhale) I am living with depression
(Exhale) “Peace be within you”
(Inhale) I am failing as a parent
(Exhale) “Peace be within you”
(Inhale) My body is failing me
(Exhale) “Christ is our Hope”
(Inhale) My cherished relationship has ended
(Exhale) “Peace be within you”

So I believe our call to stay awake has something to do with breathing, breathing each other deeply in.

And as for our call to worship God: “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would end, I would still…commission a new altar!”
Apocryphal yes, but Good News nonetheless, right? We will offer our worship here, anticipating the time when God, not the House Judiciary Committee, will arbitrate for us and when West Point will offer a class on melting down assault rifles into pruning hooks. We will come to this altar to be reminded that Christ is our Hope.

And as we worship our God week after week we can come to this lectern and each time awaken again to the word proclaimed to our fraught and wonderful world. With Christ as our Hope we can live into Resurrection Hope and not apathy. We can gather around this altar, which was really designed as a table, the table where, in a few minutes we will do what we are called to do—receive and become the body of Christ.

This table reorients us toward the revelation of God’s Word—the very Word become flesh among us—Jesus. Advent’s hope. Like this table, we can be a resurrection vision for a world in need of Hope. Here we can die to our sin and the suffocating powers of Empire and breathe again into Christ our Hope and the age to come.