Advent is a season of preparation. We are people who are trying to be prepared. Let’s begin by preparing ourselves to spend a year reading the Gospel of Matthew. We will hear passages from the Gospel of Matthew almost every Sunday in the coming year. As we read and study the Gospel of Matthew in the coming year, let’s keep four things in mind.

First, Matthew is a beautifully written, powerfully structured text. The main body of the Gospel is structured into five large sections. Each section includes a narrative and a discourse. So in each of the five sections we read a section of the story of Jesus life, followed by a lengthy discourse or sermon. So, for example, the first of the five sermons is the Sermon on the Mount. The last of the sermons includes chapters 24 & 25, including our passage for today. We can gain a greater understanding of the meaning of each passage by considering where it fits within this structure.

Second, Matthew locates the Jesus movement solidly within the Jewish tradition. All of the Gospel writers had strong connections to Jewish traditions, but Matthew’s are the strongest of all. Matthew never bothers to explain Jewish customs because his audience is comprised of Jewish followers of Christ. This might seem to be contradictory but in Matthew’s time being Jewish and being a follower of Christ were not mutually exclusive. Most of the first followers of Christ were Jews. During Matthew’s lifetime the Jesus movement had grown to include more and more gentiles. Matthew responds to this trend by emphasizing the central role of Jewish teachings and history as the context for Jesus’ life.

Third, Matthew has a realistic, critical understanding of the power structures of the religious establishment. The work of Christ puts him in conflict with earthly power structures, including the power structures of the religious establishment. Since the religious establishment surrounding Jesus is the Jewish religious establishment there is a great amount of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. This does not make Matthew anti-Jewish. Matthew is firmly located within the Jewish tradition. As a person in the center of the Jewish tradition Matthew is in a position to see the work of Christ as being different from, and sometimes in opposition to, the work of the religious establishment. This should be a provocative idea for us today as we consider that the work of the church and the religious authorities sometimes seems to be in direct opposition to the way of God’s kingdom.

Fourth, Matthew sees that the ways of God’s kingdom are opposed to earthly power structures. Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities is just one example of this conflict. Those who follow Christ are witnesses to the power of God’s love in ways the world does not expect or appreciate or even notice. Following Christ will cost us something. Following Jesus’ way of love will not lead to more power or more respect or great honors for us.

So, just in case I’ve lost you with my list, we ended up with four fundamental ideas for understanding the Gospel of Matthew:

- The structure of the book helps convey the message.
- Matthew is strongly connected to the Jewish tradition.
- Matthew has a realistic, critical view of the religious authorities.
- The way of God’s kingdom is fundamentally opposed to earthly power structures.

With all of this in mind let’s take a closer look at our Gospel passage for today. Our passage comes near the end of Chapter 24. Remember that chapters 24 and 25 are the fifth and final sermon of Jesus in Matthew. In the first part of Chapter 24 Jesus came out of the Temple and walked across the Kidron Valley and up to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus began to teach his disciples about the end times.

It’s especially interesting to me that we begin our new church year by looking ahead, all the way forward to the very end of time. Our passage today is one of several passages in Jesus’ sermon where he uses images or parables to help his disciples learn how to prepare for the end times. This passage uses the
image of Noah preparing for the flood. Other passages include the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Talents.

One of the fundamental ideas in all of these passages is we have to be prepared. In today’s passage Jesus exhorts his disciples: *Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

Taken out of context, this passage might prompt some of us to stock up on coffee, rifles and ammunition. Taken out of context, this passage might prompt us to feel more frantic. There is already so much to do, now it seems there is more pressure to make sure we have every last thing done right.

This is one of the best examples I have seen in the New Testament of the need to read scripture in context. The context for chapter 24 is the second half of the sermon, which is chapter 25. In Chapter 25 Jesus ends the sermon with this powerful story: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”*

This passage is the final portion of the final sermon of Jesus in the Gospel, the culmination of Jesus’ message. In the end we are called to care for the hungry, the poor, those who are strangers among us, the sick and those in prison. This is a dramatic twist at the end of the story.

For some people, I’m sure this is sort of a let down. We’ve gone through the whole story: the birth of Jesus, the flight into Egypt, the proclamation of John the Baptist, the temptation in the wilderness, the calling of the first disciples, the Sermon on the Mount, the calming of the storm, the healings of many people, the teaching and the parables, the feeding of the 5000 and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was a story full of love and full of conflict. Now in his final sermon Jesus teaches his disciples about the most difficult time: the end time. Jesus tells about the destruction of the Temple. Jesus tells of the terrible, narcissistic leaders who must be endured. Jesus tells of war and the fear of war. Jesus tells of the suffering that faithful people will experience.

At the very end of the story, at the end of the final sermon, Jesus gives us a most unexpected punchline. Amid all the conflict and danger of life Jesus calls us to serve those in greatest need. Be prepared for the end…by looking for and welcoming the refugees, the victims of human trafficking and the stranger in your midst. Stay awake …. and spend time caring for the poor and the sick. Be alert ….

So we don’t need to get busy. We don’t need to stand in line. We don’t need any more equipment or supplies. We don’t need to learn some sort of secret message or a mysterious strategy. We don’t need to make a fuss about our efforts.

Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us lay aside our busyness, our grand strategies and clothe ourselves with this great power, which is to care for someone who needs our care. Owe no one anything, except to love one another.

We do all that needs to be done every time we care for someone who is in great need of food, great need of healing, or great need of compassion. We are awake, we are alert to the critical moment, when our eyes are opened to see someone who is unseen or ignored. We prepare for a new birth of Christ into our lives whenever we use the greatest power we have been given, which is love.