

“Wait, Watch, Work and Hope!”
Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14 (NRSV)

Today marks the beginning of **Advent**, a wonderful season of expectation and anticipation: a time to get ready again for **Christmas**, the age-old story of **the birth of Jesus Christ**. Advent calls us to meditate on **Jesus Christ’s first arrival and his final appearance**. The first Sunday of this season is traditionally a time to pay attention to the steadily approaching, glorious day of **the culmination of Christ’s reign** in his “second” and final coming.

The **Common Lectionary** gospel lesson for today is found in the middle of Matthew’s Gospel, chapters 24 and 25, a section that begins with Jesus’ prediction that the temple in Jerusalem will one day be “thrown down” (24:1-2) -- and with the disciples’ question, **“When will this be?”** (24:3a) -- as well as with their other probing questions, **“What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the world?”** (24:3b). By the time this Gospel was written, the temple had already been destroyed by the Roman legions in 70 A.D., so the first question had already been answered. Therefore, the force of most of the concluding verses in chapter 24 and all of the verses of chapter 25 focus on the other, more pressing, secondary questions, **“When will you return?”** and **“What will be the sign of your coming?”** Throughout both chapters 24 and 25 the consistent warning given by Christ himself is to **be prepared for the coming again of the master**.

Do you ever think about the fact that **Jesus Christ will come again**, and that when it happens **it’ll be even better than Christmas?**

On March 11th, 1942, on Corregidor, a sixty-two-year-old U.S. Army officer, **General Douglas MacArthur**, secretly slipped away with his family from the Philippines and, in a minor miracle, made it safely to Australia. Before he left the islands, he said, **“I shall return.”** Two and a half years later, on October 20th, 1944, he came again through the waters to stand on the same beach, and said, “This is the voice of freedom. People of the Philippines, **I have returned.**”

If you think an ordinary man can have that kind of credibility, I tell you that **Jesus Christ** has made that same promise, yet far greater, and he is far more credible than any human being can ever be. John’s

Gospel tells us that Jesus said, “I go and prepare a place for you” and “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also” (Jn. 14:3). If you wrestle with the truth of Jesus Christ’s return, wrestle no longer. He will come again. It will happen.

1. About that day no one knows ... (24:36).

Yet, in case you think you can predict it, Jesus clarifies the date of his return, “But **about that day and hour no one knows**, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (24:36). Contrary to those who may have their charts carefully marked, no one knows exactly when Christ will return, not even Jesus Christ himself.

I gather **Tim LaHaye** and his ghostwriter, **Jerry Jenkins**, have sold over 40 million books by fictionalizing the biblical end times in a wildly popular series of novels under the title of the Left Behind books. Trying to read “the signs of the times” they lean towards giving us dates and times in their books for Christ’s return. They try to align the occurrence of certain historical events with passages in the Bible as being predictive of what will happen. But they’ve missed the boat. No one knows when Jesus Christ will return, not even the theologians, much less then novelists.

Our text tells us **even our Lord didn’t know the exact date or time** (24:36). To be sure, the idea that Jesus was ignorant of the day and hour of his return was difficult for a number of early Christians. So, it says in a footnote at the bottom of the NRSV: “some authorities” deleted the phrase “nor the Son” from their manuscripts. Nevertheless, Scripture does speak of the fact that Jesus “emptied himself” in order to become completely human (Phil. 2:7). And there are other New Testament examples of Jesus’ limited knowledge (Matt. 26:39; 27:46).

God alone knows the time and day of the final coming of the Son of Man (24:36c).

As carefully as we might read “**the signs**” of 24:3-35, they will not allow us to predict the day or time with any accuracy. Christ will come at “**an unexpected hour**” (24:44). God will confound all efforts to predict the time and day. The good news is that, if we are

living in faith and keeping the Lord's commandments, we have no need to know the exact day and time. We will be ready!

Theologian **John Gerstner** tells us about the great year of "Millerite expectation" in 1842. Based upon his study of the Bible, a man named **William Miller** felt he had the exact date: "Christ is coming back in 1842," yet he and his followers waited in vain. Naturally, Miller, a sincere Christian believer whose ideas influenced the Seventh Day Adventists, as well as the Jehovah's Witnesses, was disappointed. He realized he'd made a mistake and he was incapable of finding out why. Nevertheless, hope continued to spring eternal in his and his followers' hearts. Then, five years later, Jesus Christ didn't come to Miller, but Miller went to be with Christ. So, appropriately enough, his tombstone, quoting Daniel 8:19, had chiselled on it these words, "**At the time appointed, the end shall be**"! (The Theology of Major Sects).

No one can predict when Christ will return. But that is not to say that Jesus Christ will not return!

2. For as the days of Noah were ... (24:37-39).

For [Jesus went on to say to his disciples,] as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. (24:37-39)

The people in Noah's day were destroyed because of their wickedness; however, I don't think that's is the primary emphasis here. Rather, Jesus compares **the normalcy of these people's daily lives** with the normalcy that will prevail before the second coming.

Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage! What can be more **normal** than that? Not much. Who can fault that! No one. We all rightly enjoy these things, as much as we rightly enjoy Christmas. The fault is not that we do such things, but that we are so caught up in the routine of daily life that we take no thought for our spiritual lives, or for what we are doing to build and exemplify the

characteristics of the kingdom in our lives each and every day. And one day -- perhaps even some day soon -- Christ will hold us to account. **The problem isn't gross sin; it's "secular indifference" or a simple "nonchalance about God" (Frederick Dale Bruner, p. 881).**

It isn't that **Noah's neighbours** had had no warning. They did. After all, they could've seen him at work, and must've questioned him. It's hard to imagine Noah wouldn't have called them to repentance so that they, too, might have been saved. However, it's equally hard to imagine them thinking of Noah as anything other than a religious kook. Noah would've been hard-pressed to have been able to say or do anything that would've jolted them out of their rut. The situation was very much like today. There are all kinds of people sounding the warning. But few take it seriously.

And then **when the flood came it was a big surprise**. At first they were mildly concerned. Then they grew a little anxious as the water crept towards their homes. Then they began to be afraid as the water continued to rise. Then they became frantic as everything was washed away. And then it was over. By the time they were sufficiently aroused to do something, it was too late. The time for preparation was long gone. So it will be with the coming of the Son of Man.

Advent is a good time to take stock of our lives.

3. One will be taken and one will be left ... (24:40-42).

When the Son of Man comes again, Matthew tells us,

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left." (24:40-41).

Again, the emphasis is on **the normal routine of life**. People find themselves engaged in everyday work. There's no indication today will be any different from yesterday or the day before. Life goes on. Except, in this instance, it doesn't! One is taken and one is left in place. Those who've suddenly lost a loved one know exactly what

this means. An accident, ill health, death: it's all happened before. The end comes. And it will happen, inevitably, one day, for all of us.

I know we don't like to think about this. I think it was **Woody Allen** who said, "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens!" So also, **Stephen Hawking**, the famous physicist tells us, "I was asked in Japan recently not to predict the end of the world – they were nervous it might affect the stock market" (1995). "It's never a question of if; it's always a question of when" (Alzheimer's disease).

It is phrases such as those in Matthew's Gospel about being "left behind" that give rise to the doctrine of "**the rapture**" -- the belief common, especially in North America, that, at the second coming, the faithful will immediately be taken up and **the unfaithful will be left behind**. This doctrine gives rise to such **bumper stickers** as you may've seen here in Abbotsford: "CAUTION: IN THE EVENT OF RAPTURE, THIS CAR WILL BE DRIVERLESS." This doctrine has given rise to inappropriate scaremongering, threatening people into faith so that they won't be the ones left behind. I personally try to avoid people who are so "enraptured by the rapture," in part, because some of them seem so spiritually arrogant. I imagine some of them saying, "Nah-nah, nah, nah-nah" as they depart. Hardly Christlike!

But whatever your theology about the final detail of these verses, there's no doubt: #1, that Christ will come again; #2, that his coming will be swift and surprising; and, #3, that he will divide people into two groups -- the faithful and the unfaithful; and, finally, #4, that **we'd better be ready**.

"Keep awake therefore," says Jesus, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (24:42). **How do we stay awake 24/7?**

I don't know about you, but for me, it isn't humanly possible. Nevertheless, our preparation has to do with **being spiritually, rather than physically, awake**. Advent is a good time to enhance our spiritual awareness. The person who lives in daily companionship with Jesus will not be threatened by Jesus' sudden appearance. Instead, it will be an occasion for much joy, much like the joy that we experience when we see a loved one after a long

absence. So wait, watch, work and pray and, all along, whatever may come, have hope

4. Therefore you must also be ready ... (24:43-44).

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 must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour (24:43-44).

The best way to get ready for Jesus Christ's coming is to **be ready** when he comes. How many were ready for Jesus when he came as a baby in Bethlehem? Not many, I'm afraid. Not the innkeeper, nor Herod. It seems only Mary, perhaps the shepherds, the astrologers from the east, and, maybe, Anna and Simeon were prepared. There was something that had happened to them that made them prepared for Jesus' coming.

The best way for us to get ready is to **ask Christ to come into our heart by faith**, to fill us with his Spirit, and to ask and allow him to live his life through ours in fresh, and radical ways. It's got to be an everyday thing. "Don't make special preparation." "Live prepared." "Be prepared." "Fulfill your days always, every day, in expectation of the Great Surprise" (**Borsch & Napier**, p.13). "Constant readiness is the only safeguard" (**Morris**, p. 616).

Chuck Swindoll tells a delightful story about **Jake, the Janitor** with whom he worked when he was younger, for four-and-a-half years, in a machine shop. Jake's job was to sweep and clean out the metal shavings underneath the huge lathes they were turning. Jake was a Christian, and he loved the teachings of the Bible on prophecy. Swindoll remembers hearing him sing hymns as he worked. Many of them had to do with the Second Coming of Christ, such as "When the roll is called up yonder" and "In the sweet by and by."

Late one Friday afternoon, about ten minutes to quitting time, when they were all tired out, Swindoll looked at Jake and asked him, "**Jake, are you ready?**" He said, "Uh-huh." But he was all dirty. He was obviously not ready. In fact, he looked like he was ready to keep on

working. Swindoll said, "Aren't you ready to go home?" Jake replied, "Yeah, I'm ready." But Swindoll said, "Look at you! You're not ready. You've gotta go and clean up!" Yet Jake protested. "No," he said, "let me show you."

So he unzipped his coveralls, and underneath were the neatest and cleanest clothes you'd imagine. He was ready, so that when the whistle blew all he had to do was wash his hands, unzip and step out of that overall, walk up and punch the clock, and he was gone. Jake said, "**You see, I stay ready to keep from getting ready** -- just like I'm ready for Jesus." That's the way it should be -- we need to be ready to meet Christ at a moments' notice.

Advent is a good time to consider **how ready we are** for Christ's second coming.

So get ready, get set; **get your heart right with God.**

And there are **a number of other things you and I can do.**

After Matthew's Gospel lesson for today ends, we're told Jesus gives us **three parable illustrations** that relate directly to our text: the parable of the faithful and unfaithful slave (24:45-51); the parable of the ten bridesmaids, five who were wise and prepared, and five who were foolish and unprepared (25:1-13); and the parable of the talents, some of which were wisely invested and put to work, and one of which was foolishly buried (25:14-30).

These parables imply there are **any number of similar, practical things we can do** to be ready for Christ's second coming, as there are ways for preparing for Christmas: by being useful in whatever work we've been given to do, by being kind to others, by keeping our spiritual lamps burning -- by seeing that our spiritual disciplines are continually practiced and applied -- and by investing our gifts and skills wisely for the kingdom.

This section of Scripture concludes, in chapter 25, with Jesus' famous description of **the judgment of the nations**, "when the Son of Man [will come] in all his glory, and all the angels with him, [and when] he will sit on the throne of his glory" (25:1). Then the "sheep" which

helped the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned will be separated from the “goats” which failed to render this kind of sacrificial service. And the righteous sheep will be welcomed into “the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world” but the goats will be find some other, lesser reward (25:31-46).

Lest our text for today and this sermon draw you only towards fear of judgment, I will remind you that Christ came and will come again to be **our “saving-judging Lord”** (W. W. Bryden). One of the beautiful pictures Jesus gives us of the end is **a wedding banquet** (Matt. 22:3ff; 25:1ff). He is the bridegroom who waits for his bride, the church. When he comes again **there will be celebration and joy and hope**. The Advent season is meant to draw us to believe afresh that God’s new, and final day of forgiveness and resurrection, and of peace and hope and love -- which is the incarnation’s deepest meaning -- is possible for you and for me.

Ever since I read the stories of the sailors who rounded the tip of Africa in search of spices in the fabled east, I’ve wanted to see **the Cape of Good Hope**. A few years ago, I was able to visit South Africa with my son, Jonathan, and a few years after that, again, with my wife, Colleen. Each time, along with our visits to Capetown and the winelands, we took a car trip around the beautiful, rugged peninsula of the Cape of Good Hope. It was an great experience. So, too, it must’ve been a relief to countless seafarers to have discovered respite at such a lovely stopping place in a such beautiful country after experiencing all the storms of their Atlantic ocean journeys. Seeing it was a foretaste of everything that is yet to be.

It’s Advent. Jesus Christ is coming again. Are you ready for him?

Amen

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