

Between the Times
Matthew 24:36-44
First Sunday of Advent
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West Union, IA
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Gospel Reading

It happens every year, on this First Sunday of Advent. The world around us is already in full holiday mode. Everything seems to be pushing us toward Christmas. The ads, the sales, the television shows, and movies, are all about Christmas, or at least Christmas shopping, and holiday preparation. There is no escaping it. Even in the church, we know we are beginning the season of preparation and expectation of the glorious birth of the child, the Christ child, who will come to save the world. But...on this Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent, the lectionary seems to say, "Not so fast." We do not hear a Christmas story at all. We do not hear about an Angel visit, or John the Baptist urging us to prepare the way. Instead, we hear from Jesus himself. That's right, when the world around us is focused on December 25th, when we think we are preparing for the birth of a child, we are given a reading from later in the Gospel of Matthew. But, before you cry foul, listen to Matthew, chapter 24, verses 36-44:

³⁶ "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.

⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

On this first Sunday in Advent, we come face to face with, and are forced to struggle with the idea of living "Between the Times." The historical Jesus came to initiate the kingdom of God, but the kingdom is both here and now, and is yet to come. Jesus has come and will come again. During the Season of Advent, we prepare our hearts and minds, once again, for the coming of the Christ child, and we recognize and prepare for the second coming of the Son of God to the world: the eschaton, the Parousia, the apocalypse, the end of days, the new creation.

Often people respond to eschatology, the theology of the end of days, in one of two ways. Warned of the coming judgment some of us study the apocalyptic writings for clues and signs. Then, study recent events, read the papers, watch the news, and scour the internet searching for hints that the day is coming when the Son of Man will come in the clouds, to judge the nations; to separate the sheep from the goats; to call the elect to himself and banish the reprobate to eternal fire and damnation.

The scriptures are there; outlining the signs and the events that will lead up to the Parousia. A few verses before our reading from Matthew, Jesus said;

"...the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." (*Matthew 24:29-31, NRSV*)

Read through the lens of these scriptures, world events can be freighting. Global Warming, wildfires, tensions in the Middle East, and conflicts between nations can all be understood as signs of Christ returning.

If you don't want to do the work, there are always books, or films, or seminars by someone, or some group, claiming to have figured it out; when the day and hour is coming. What it will be like when the end comes, when the world comes to an end, when all humankind will be judged.

But, in our reading this morning, Jesus plainly says: "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the

Father." No one knows when the day and hour are coming when the Son of Man will return in glory...only the Father knows.

Which brings me to the second way that people respond to eschatological warnings: apathy. We have all heard the scriptures. We have heard the warnings and rantings of those who claim to have figured it out, and we are all still here. I am sure you have heard sermons about this subject over and over again. It is no wonder that any urgency regarding the second coming of Jesus is lost, and we have, many of us, become numb to the idea. After all, it has been almost two thousand years since Jesus said these things, since Jesus ascended to heaven, and here we are waiting and not knowing.

But rather than apathy, rather than complacency about the coming of the kingdom, we are urged to stay awake for we do not know the day and hour. We are urged, even warned, that we "...must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

When the Gospel According to Matthew was written, it had been no more than a generation since Jesus walked the earth, and the message to them was that given the difficulty of predicting the time of Jesus' return, their goal was to be sufficiently prepared for it, so that the exact time of the eschatological event was irrelevant. Unlike the master of the house who did not know when the thieves would break in, being prepared meant it did not matter when the hour came. Being prepared takes away any need for searching the signs, for interpreting events, and heeding false prophets who claim to read the signs. In other words, the process of preparing for Jesus' return, rather than predicting its occurrence, was for the early church the primary goal, and should be the goal for every Christian today.

In our New Testament reading from Romans, chapter 13, Paul writes: "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

For Paul, being prepared for the coming of Christ, means setting aside the darkness and things of the flesh, and putting on the armor of light, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, becoming Christ-like in who we are and what we do.

Living "Between the Times," between the time when Jesus walked the earth, and the time when he returns in Glory, means trusting and hoping that everything God began in the life and death of Jesus, God continues in this time. That God continues to transform us more and more into the nature of

Christ. Christ, in whom all of Gods mercy and loving-kindness are manifest is the model and source of our preparation in these between times.

For Paul that meant setting aside the darkness of this world and living in the light of Christ, but more than that, for us, it means living into the social ethic of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and siding with the marginalized of society. This is the recurring theme of Jesus' ministry throughout the gospels, and the charge to us in his church.

This first Sunday of Advent, and every Advent, calls us into a continuing history of relationship with Christ, who meets us whichever way we turn, whether toward the past, the present or the future, Christ meets us there, and calls us to be ready for the time when all will be made new, all will be judged, and creation will be at peace.

Let us pray:

Holy God, as we begin another Advent, another season of preparation and expectation, open our hearts to this time of waiting for your Son. Show us in the between times, how to prepare for another coming, another revelation of your glory. Lord, only you know when the day will come, help us to live as we are ready for your return. Show us ways to live in the light and live into your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

AMEN.