



Matthew 24:36-44

Get Ready!©
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Advent 2

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As I read this passage over and over and over, a song kept playing in my head. I think it was Jesus who sang it first: “Get ready, cause here I come!”

In this text, Jesus sounds kind of like he is coming at any moment, on the one hand, yet then he says no one really knows when it will be.

But, in this passage and in others, Jesus makes it pretty clear that it is going to happen and he tells about some fairly awesome, scary things. In fact, they are so awesome that books and movies have been made about these things.

I remember the book that became very popular in the 1970's – *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, written by Hal Lindsey, and more recently the *Left Behind* series of books that were made into movies, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

These authors – along with others – took this Scripture passage from Matthew and combined it with other Scriptures about the end of the world and the second coming of Christ and tried to create a timeline of what will happen and when it might be.

In the early 1970's, I was a very young woman who was struggling to grow into a more mature faith and to grasp a faith of my own, rather than the faith of my parents. In other words, I wanted to seek out what I personally believed and not just copy what they believed. That is actually a very important step in our growing into a mature faith, although I didn't know it at the time.

I remember, after reading Lindsey's book, asking my mother – a lifelong Christian and Presbyterian most of her life - what she thought about Jesus' coming back and wasn't she afraid of what would happen? Did she think it was going to happen soon?

I remember her answer well. She almost seemed irritated at the question, or at the subject in general. "Yes. I do believe Jesus will come back, as he said he would." She answered. "But I have no idea when it will happen and no, I am not afraid of it. I don't think I need to be afraid because he has already saved me."

Well, I was not totally satisfied with her answer back then. I thought maybe she was not informed well enough. Or maybe she was in denial about it all, or acting like that proverbial ostrich that keeps its head buried in the sand. Maybe she just didn't want to face that the judgment day was coming soon, or that the Rapture would be really frightening.

The Rapture is defined as being that time when Jesus returns (or just before he comes, depending on whose version it is) and as the Scripture in Matthew describes, believers will be caught up and taken to heaven, but unbelievers will be left behind for a period of terrible things happening, that period being called the Great Tribulation.

The same people who strongly believe that this is the way it will all happen, also have been bent on predicting *when* it will happen. They would, most likely, take Jesus' command to get ready – to be watchful – as a call to expect it to happen any day, especially with all the signs that we see happening today – signs like we talked about a few Sunday's ago – wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes – all those things.

But if you remember, Jesus said in those passages not to get caught up in believing that's the end. He warned against following false prophets and people who were saying they were him.

And now, the thing we want to be sure to hear, loud and clear, is that Jesus says no one – NO ONE knows the time when this great event will happen. He says the angels in heaven do not know. He says even he – the Son of God – does not know. God, and God alone, is the one and only who knows the time.

Please don't think I am making light of this, or suggesting we just go about our lives and never think about these things. Scripture makes it clear that it is important for us to think about Jesus' second coming.

It is not wrong for us to contemplate his coming. In fact, that is very much a part of what Advent is about. Yes, it is about remembering the birth of Jesus – the Word become flesh – human – to live among us, but as I said last week, Advent is about living in that “in between time” of Christ's birth and of his coming again.

While we are not to be obsessed with when it will happen – or even what will exactly happen – Jesus does tell us to be ready for it. Douglas Hood Jr. wrote these words in his commentary on this passage in GoodPreacher.com:

“This text is less about the end times and more about discipleship; what it means to follow Christ both in our behavior and in relationship to others. (Jesus) is returning to the earth. Life will not go on forever, day after day, year after year, without some conclusion. All of history is moving toward an end. That knowledge is given to positively impact the decisions made today, decisions of the manner in which we will live.”

When Jesus says to be ready, I agree with Douglas Hood. Getting ready doesn't mean selling all your possessions, quitting your job and sitting on the top of a mountain looking day and night at the sky as you wait for it to open up and take you into the heavens first.

Getting ready – being ready is to do the work Jesus taught: it is to love others with a true, Christ-like love. It is helping and giving to the poor and the sick; visiting the forgotten – those in prison, those in mental institutes, those in nursing homes, in homeless shelters.

It is living a life of worship and stewardship and fellowship. It is praying and study – it is being a disciple, having the mind of Christ.

But, as for Jesus referring to the great judgment day. Don't get the idea that your good works is what will save you on that day. Those good works are what we do because we love Jesus so much. And we love him, do we not, because of his great love for us? His love that took him to the cross where he bled and died – giving himself completely for us.

It is in that sacrificial act of love that we have known grace – grace that forgives us of our sin, grace that saves us from death, it is grace alone that will pour over us and speak for us through Christ our great advocate on that Day of Judgment.

We follow Christ's commands because we love him. But it is Christ alone who sets us free from sin and gives us salvation.

I have come to realize that my dear mother was right – as she usually was. We really do have nothing to fear. We live our lives in readiness as we walk in the footprints of Jesus and do his work. We live expectantly – thinking of his coming, expecting it to happen, yet not fearing because we belong to him.

Douglas Hood also told this story in his commentary:

“Richard Gribble tells a helpful story of a woman who made a discovery quite accidentally in her basement. One day she noticed some forgotten potatoes had sprouted in the darkest corner of the room.

At first, she could not figure out how they had received any light to grow. Then she noticed that she had hung a cooper kettle from a rafter near the cellar window. She kept the kettle so brightly polished that it reflected the rays of the sun from the small window onto the potatoes.

She would later say to a friend that when she saw that reflection, and the growth that it nurtured, she realized that she can be a “cooper kettle Christian”—she can catch the rays of the Son of God and reflect his light to some dark corner of life.

This text announces that in that last day, each of us will “stand before (Jesus).” Perhaps there is no better preparation for that future day than learning to reflect his light in the present.”

But there is one last thing to say here before closing this message. In the passage just before this one Jesus talks about the fig tree. He says, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. Every time they sprout leaves, you know the seasons are changing.”

Tom Long, one of my favorite preachers and professors writes in the latest edition of the Presbyterian Outlook: “I think what Jesus is saying by this commonplace image of the fig tree is that even today, here and there, now and then, we can see the green leaves of Christ's redemption sprouting forth.

We should look for the cosmic and the ultimate in the immediate and the nearby. The light that will shine in glory at the end of all time is already beaming shafts of light into the darkness now.

Looking for the breaking in of God's kingdom is not a matter of wearing a robe and climbing a mountain; it's more like watching the fig tree in your backyard garden.”

Tom Long also made reference to the book “The Difference Heaven Makes,” written by Christopher Morse, who gives some interesting food for thought. “We talk at funerals

and elsewhere,” he writes, “about people going to heaven, as if heaven were a distant place toward which we are traveling.

But the Scriptures more often puts it the other way: Heaven is coming to us. “Heaven” is a biblical image for the place from which God acts toward the world, and heaven constantly draws near to us.

Like ocean waves breaking on the shore, the very life of God keeps breaking into the world, and we can feel the spray and smell the salt.

In other words, the life of God keeps “adventing” (coming, arriving) into our time, our history, our life.”

There is no dread of those last days when we are ready, when we know we belong to the one who gave his all for us. We should reflect on it; we should be ready for it, by being faithful disciples, but we need not fear.

Thanks be to God for his Son, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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