

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> November

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Matthew 24:36-44 "What does it look like to be ready?"

You will have gathered by now – if you didn't already know – that today is the first Sunday of Advent for this year. Interestingly, it's also the first Sunday of the new liturgical year...so it's kind of like the start of a new year of sorts. That gives it a bit of extra weight I reckon, it comes with an opportunity to re-calibrate, to remember and reflect, and to contemplate how we want our lives to take shape not only for the Advent season, but in the year that issues forth out of that season, and is informed by it.

So, what do we understand this season of Advent to be about? Anyone game to share their ideas? Well, for me the idea of Advent as a meaningful part of the church calendar is relatively new; and even when I came to understand that it was more than opening a little cardboard door and retrieving a chocolate, I still thought it was essentially a pre-Christmas thing...nice stories and emblems, *and* chocolate, that help focus us on the birth of Christ amidst the madness of our Cultural-Christmas trappings.

But it turns out, that was also a pretty shallow grasp of Advent's meaning. The beginning of the liturgical year is much more than only a prelude to the Nativity. On the First Sunday in Advent, the church begins its new year celebration by focusing on the End – "End" with a capital E – we begin with the expectation of Jesus' final coming to us. It's true, we often attempt in these weeks to re-live, to re-capture the sense of what it means to anticipate Christ's birth and that can be a powerful experience. However, we're not actually waiting for Christ to come the first time – He's done that, He came, and we celebrate that at Christmas. In these weeks of Advent we're waiting for Christ's *return*, His *second* coming.

This is a time to cultivate a fresh sense of expectation if our faith and focus has become a bit tired. The liturgical season of Advent with its focus on the second coming reminds us that the work of the first advent, or coming of Jesus is not complete – "But wait, there's more!" We're remembering that this is not as good as it gets, we're not yet at the end of the story...

*Actually*, we got there this week in our final Revelation study. The first verses of chapter 22 of Revelation describe the River of Life at the culmination of God's purposes, it says,

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup>through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; <sup>4</sup> they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

To be sure, there's a lot of imagery in those verses so that we shouldn't imagine that every aspect will look just as described there. But, that's not the same as saying that it's not real. The story of God's relationship with the world - humanity and creation - is a story that's going somewhere, and it ends well! This beautiful ending is precipitated by Christ's return when the restoration of all things takes place and everything is finally as it's supposed to be, including the reign of God under which all of creation flourishes as it was designed to do. In chapter 22 of Revelation Jesus promises multiples times to come back, and John, in the true spirit of Advent cries out at the close of the book, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!"

Now, our gospel passage today points to just these themes. The first gospel reading for the Lectionary year and the start of Advent is indeed focused on the *return* of Christ to earth. This is what is to captivate our heads and our hearts at this time of year.

Jesus tells the disciples that only the Father knows when the Son will come back. So, clearly this is not about predicting the precise date when we should expect Him. Instead, the emphasis is on readiness. Jesus wants to impress upon the disciples that they should be prepared – always. This isn't about a last minute

scramble in order to feign faithfulness – there won't be any warning, so that won't work. We are to live our lives perpetually ready...that is the Christian life.

Speaking of Jesus' words to the disciples, Stanley Saunders of Colombia Theological Seminary writes,

This is not advice for crisis moments, but a call to perpetual, normative readiness, regardless of circumstance.... Watchfulness or wakefulness is here not a defensive or preventive posture, but heightened attentiveness, attuned both to the signs of God's presence and power, as well as the signs that the powers of this world are doubling down.

Jesus talks about the time of Noah as an example of when people were not prepared. Interestingly, the people of Noah's day are not cited for their gross sinfulness. Instead the issue appears to be that they simply imagined that business as usual would continue forever. Their lives were made up of a seemingly endless flow of repeated activities which left them with neither the time nor the inclination to face the future. Dale Bruner, in his commentary on Matthew says that "nonchalance about God" was their sin, and he suggests that this nonchalance is the "beginning and end problem for humanity" in general.

So, what does it look like to be ready for the return of Jesus whenever that will be? The answer to that question isn't in our text for today but it follows on in the three parables that come next.

The first is the parable of the "Faithful or Unfaithful Slave." This story contrasts the faithful and wise slave who continues to act with integrity in his master's absence, with the wicked slave who exploits his master's absence by beating his fellow slaves and keeping poor company. Noteworthy is the fact that the actions of the faithful servant are not exceptional, Jesus describes him as one who gives the other slaves their allocation of food at the proper time, that is, he simply does what is expected of him, faithfully, in the Master's presence, and when in his absence.

The second parable is the parable of the "Ten Bridesmaids." Of the ten bridesmaids, five wise bridesmaids went prepared to meet the bridegroom with extra oil for their lamps, but the other five bridesmaids are described as foolish

because they took no additional oil. When the bridegroom was delayed, the lamps of the foolish bridesmaids went out, and it was while they were away buying additional oil, that the bridegroom returned. Once they finally got back with their lamps replenished they had missed their opportunity to join in the wedding banquet.

The third parable is the parable of the "Talents." Here we see a man trusting his slaves with various amounts of money while he went away on a journey. On his return he calls his slaves to him to account for the money he gave them. Two of the slaves have increased the value of what was given to them, and as a result the man gives them even more. The third slave however, simply hid the money in his master's absence and he returned to his master the amount he was originally given. The master is displeased with his slave and takes from him even the little that he has.

And after these three parables Jesus talks about how the nations will be judged when He returns. He contrasts the sheep with the goats who He separates based on their actions. He praises the sheep for their actions of mercy and care towards the hungry, poor, and marginalised. He says that when they acted in such a manner towards others, it was the same as if they had shown such love to Him.

The goats on the other hand ignored the needs around them and showed no compassion for the suffering and needy. Jesus judges them as having not cared for Him.

This teaching of Jesus probes our hearts and challenges us to examine our lives to see if they're consistent with our profession as followers of Christ – because it matters. However, these are not examples of extraordinary acts but instead they speak of ordinary lives of faithfulness and integrity.

Remember how Jesus talked about the time of Noah and how everyone was just carrying on as normal when the flood came? Likewise, the workers in the field are going about their daily tasks when suddenly it's time – the Son of Man returns and there's an unexpected and critical separation...one is taken and one is left.

Chelsea Harmon of Calvin Theological Seminary suggests it's not the "ordinariness" that's at issue, she writes,

we understand that we are going about our business and living our lives best when we are doing so with God in mind, with integrated knowledge: faith and works held together, not in opposition. We go about our "field" work and "grinding" tasks until the Lord comes—we don't just hole ourselves up in enclaves or in the sanctuary, holding vigil. We keep at being productive members of the world until Christ comes again.

I remember being asked the question during Christian Club in high school, "What do I want to be doing when Jesus comes back?" I, along with most of the others present suggested that we hoped we'd be praying, or witnessing, or engaged in some activity perceived as "spiritual." Now there's nothing wrong with those things, and it would be great to be occupied that way at Jesus' return, but the problem was, I, we, all thought back then that it would be *better* to be found in specifically spiritual activity rather than just engaged with life. I don't think that way now. Now I understand that all of our life is spiritual – or at least it's supposed to be...that integration that Harmon talks about where our faith and every aspect of our lives are in harmony with each other – consistent and true.

Roland Allen of Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, sums it up when he says,

Matthew 24:37-44 reinforces the idea that the community must "be ready." – *that's all of us together, not just as individuals* - In this context, to "be ready" is to continue to do what Jesus taught in the Gospel of Matthew. The community is to prepare for the final advent less by doing special things and more by living and witnessing as Jesus instructed. The liturgical season of Advent is an annual reminder of the importance of faithfully doing what Jesus said.

This is readiness. Lives lived *in* the story of what God is doing in the world...living like it's true! Having our days shaped by the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus and in the confidence that on *that* basis God is reconciling all things to Himself...putting back together all that was wrenched apart and restoring and

renewing all things. And how do we do that? We get on with faithfully doing what Jesus told us to do...

that is, loving God with *all of ourselves*, and our neighbour as ourselves, bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in all the world and making disciples for Him...participating in the ushering in of the kingdom of God by prayer and actions which reflect our hope of a world of justice and righteousness where God reigns and humans and all of creation flourishes.

This kingdom is what we're waiting for...let's live ready.