

GET READY, 'CAUSE HERE I COME

Smokey Robinson wrote the words to a love song I think sounds perfect to start off our Advent season, "I'm bringing you a love that's true, I'm gonna try to make you love me too, so get ready, 'cause here I come." We've all heard countless Advent sermons, whether warning us of Jesus returning like a thief in the night; which probably inspired fear in some of us, or a reminder to be ready, be watchful, be awake; which probably made some of us so heavenly minded we're no earthly good!

So, which is it? Doom and gloom or don't miss the boat? That was an ark reference, just to see if you were paying attention. I used to have a pin that said, "Jesus is Coming, Look Busy." That was before I became a pastor but I still realize the potential for humor in that phrase. We'd all like to look busy when Jesus returns rather than being caught unprepared.

The problem is we should be busy but doing the right things for the right reasons. Feeling under threat from doing nothing is the wrong motivation for living a life of faith. When my daughter was small her grandparents also had small children at home and when one of them didn't want to eat their vegetables they would tell them the police would come and take them away. I think maybe that's why my daughter wanted to be a vegetarian.

As I said, every year when Advent comes around the theme is the same; be ready, be alert. How long can humans really be expected to remain attentive to something we've long anticipated but never seen? This time of the year it's difficult for us to focus on anything but our Christmas plans. If Christ wanted us truly ready He shouldn't have made His birthday so exciting. That's a joke, by the way.

Not to rain on anyone's parade, but as I tell my couples in premarital counseling, if you put as much effort into the marriage as you do the wedding you'll do well. Same for us; if we put as much focus into preparing for Christ as we do into preparing for Christmas we will have done it right.

Last week's Scripture taught us about a returning King and what the King represents; righteousness and justice. How about we look at this week's Scripture and what Jesus said about His return? We see a ruler who is concerned with peace, faith and living in a right relationship with God and with others. That's nothing new in the overall theme of Scripture, but here the focus is on a future event.

As they say in England, He's not trying to catch us out by making these statements. He doesn't want to find us making a mistake and missing Him. He sincerely wants each of His followers to be in a good place; spiritually, emotionally, to be able to greet His appearance with joy. No hidden agenda, no contest. This isn't the hunger games trying to eliminate the weak. If the Sermon on the Mount teaches us anything the weak will be right up at the front of the receiving line. Weak in the world's eyes, that is, but strong in faith.

A word of explanation is due when reading this chapter of Matthew. Christ is giving counsel and warning to His disciples living in the 1st century AD, but His words also apply to believers in every generation. The problem comes when we try to calculate or estimate or predict the when of this events. Many have tried and obviously have all been proven false because Christ has yet to return.

There is a time element here and that relates to the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 AD. That was a fixed time in history and it caused great losses and deaths and a renewed sense of anticipation for Christ to return and put it all right again. However, within these verses there are words for us to heed because in terms of the time of Christ's return we are still without a guess.

No one knows what day or time, not the angels, not the Son, but only the Father. He has his own schedule, His own calendar and He has chosen the time for Christ to return. All we know from other places in the New Testament is that we can hasten or accelerate the time of His return with our work in the world. Beyond that it's still a vague timeline.

What we can focus on in this passage is the what rather than the when. As in the days of the flood the people were living life exactly as they wanted, day after day, repeating the same actions and decisions without a care for the giant boat being constructed in their midst. They didn't heed the rain until it became an ocean.

Jesus is saying don't let this happen to you. There may be no giant boat on display as a wakeup call, but there is the word of God giving you ample reason to expect what's coming. Business as usual is not going to cut it if that business is anything other than the faithful life of a disciple of Christ.

The people didn't know the Flood was coming because everything was as it had always been. If anything political, cultural or spiritual was different, it was only a matter of degree; and degrees of difference are almost impossible to measure, since we humans are inclined to think of our own times as unique in their goodness or their badness.¹

We live in turbulent and troubled times that tend to take our attention away from what remains true; the love of God, the salvation of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. These three truths are our focal point. Nothing else will sustain us in a chaotic world. Who knows what could happen today, tomorrow or next month? What will make us truly prepared?

For some it may be the thought that if things get worse we can pray that Christ will return and take us out of this place. Others may see bad times as a call to fight against the darkness of the world and shine the light of Christ. Either way, the burden is on us to be ready for Him.

Jesus likens His arrival to a person breaking into someone's house. Despite our modern security systems and alarms we are only so protected. Back in the time of Christ the houses

¹Kalas, J. Ellsworth, *Immersion Bible Studies – Matthew*, pg. 67

were made of clay, easily broken into by literally breaking a hole into the wall and entering unseen. If we knew what day the burglar would come we'd stay home and defend the house, but that's not confidence, that's paranoia.

Will Christ dig through our defenses, our beliefs, false or true, our preconceived notions of who He is and appear in a way we could not have dreamt? It's possible that for all our knowledge and what we think of as strength we still have underestimated Him. He's not looking for Doomsday preppers. He's looking for servants, trustworthy and loyal servants.

As much as Jesus is concerned with our readiness, He is equally concerned with what readiness looks like. For Him, it is living in a manner that demonstrates our understanding of what His end goal is. He told a parable about sheep and goats and what each one represents and how the King, that is, Christ the King, would deal with each group based on what they had done with their lives.

As my preaching professor wrote, "My responsibility and yours is to extend to every individual the kind of love and concern we would extend if we knew that person was our Lord Jesus Christ because our Lord Jesus Christ thinks of each individual that way."

He won't be concerned with SAT scores, IRA values or NASDAQ investments. He will look at how many hungry people we fed and how many suffering people we helped and how many burdens we lightened. How many times we looked outside of ourselves and gave until it cost us something more than money.

If we live this way we don't have to worry about keeping one eye on the sky waiting for Him to appear. We are called to live as if God is already here with us, because, indeed, God is already here with us. That's the meaning of Emmanuel. We are called, not to sit and wait for something to happen in the future, but to live lives of hope and joy, right now, today. Now is the acceptable time. Today is the day of salvation.

When will God's kingdom be established? It happens every time a person meets our Lord on the road of life. It will happen when our lives end, and ultimately, it will happen at the end of time.² No big mystery. It will happen, sure as rain falls from the sky and waters the earth and makes the plants grow. We can see that and believe in that without too much effort, so why should we doubt what Christ said will happen?

If the fact that He's coming at a time you don't expect makes you picture with regret the day you answered your door in your pajamas to find the meter man standing there, just remember you can't anticipate the exact day, but you can live in confidence that the day will come. What's the solution? Always get dressed and ready to face the day. Seriously, as one who's answered the door on my day off and had to face a parishioner while wearing my bathrobe, it's a good practice.

²Mosser, David N., editor, *the Abingdon Preaching Annual 2013*, pg.372

If I had my choice I would like to see Jesus return on Christmas while He's fresh on our minds, hopefully. Or maybe on New Year's Day to start things right. Easter would also seem an appropriate time, sort of recreate the whole empty tomb scene for those of us who missed it. I have a feeling, however, that Jesus will come on a Monday morning while I'm still not ready for visitors.

And if that's the case, that will be my problem, not His. I'm reasonably sure a bathrobe isn't going to bother Him if the person wearing that bathrobe has been faithful to Him and has put her trust in Him and His promises and obeyed His two great commandments by loving God and loving neighbor.

We are thankful this month for what we have, but there are other things to be thankful for we sometimes overlook. We can be thankful that God has given us the opportunity to set our hearts in order again and again to receive Him. We can be thankful that grace from God allows us to give our lives back to Him over and over.

As believers, we should realize the best is yet to come and ultimately live for the day when Christ returns. Our greatest hope and the definitive solution to present suffering is to be found in the hope of Christ's return.³

When I was a kid my family always made lists of Christmas presents we would like to receive. This list was posted on the kitchen cupboard door and from time to time I'm sure we would add or subtract items as the days went along. I used to be very expert at lifting the tape from just the end of a wrapped present under the tree to see if I could determine what it was. My family knows to this day I still have trouble waiting to open gifts and they tease me about saving them for Christmas Eve.

It's harmless fun to want to know what your presents are before Christmas arrives, but trying to pinpoint the time Christ will come because you're impatient or tired of waiting will do you no good. He hasn't even been given the day of His arrival yet. Only God holds that knowledge, but He is coming, and that must be enough for us.

Join me in the declaration we profess each time we share in the Lord's Supper: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Amen.

³ESV Study Bible, pg.2533