

## Look to the Future

### Matthew 24:36-44

<sup>36</sup> "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> 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, <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

I pray that you had a good Thanksgiving and got to be with some people you care about! I hope the holiday was one where you were able to think of those people, events and things this year that brought you joy, hope and some excitement. If you are a shopper, I hope you found all the bargains you sought. Most of us got up from the dinner table and moved on to plan for the Christmas holiday. However, this is the beginning of our church year, and our goal is to prepare, not so much for Christmas, but for Christ's return.

In contrast to some Eastern religions that view time as an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, Christianity with its Judaic roots is a deeply historical religion. This history begins with God's creation of the world and ends with God's judgment and re-creation of it. Christians look backward, remembering God's mighty acts of salvation over the generations, and forward, anticipating the vindication of God's ways in a new heaven and a new earth. We live, as Karl Barth said, "between the times." We live, knowing our past and looking to God's future.

The season of Advent invites us to consider again the character of our Christian existence "between the times." On the one hand, Advent reminds us of God's promises to Israel of Immanuel. God comes in human flesh to deliver God's people from sin and evil. On the other hand, Advent calls us to anticipate the day on which Immanuel will return as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will put all that resists him, even death

itself, under his feet. Living between the times, we give thanks to God for the Christ child, even as we plead with God to realize, once and for all, the kingdom that Jesus declared to be at hand.

Our scripture stands in a series of sayings and parables about a day of judgment that will inaugurate this kingdom to come. Jesus warns that this day will take the world by surprise, and us too. As in Noah's time, people (that includes us) will be going about their everyday business—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage—with no awareness of God's impending judgment. They and we will be like a householder who fails to anticipate the hour at which the thief will break in. Not even the angels or the Son know the day or hour. The point is that we must be ready for the Lord at any time. When he finally appears, those who are ready will be saved, and those who are not ready will perish.

Jesus reiterates these themes in three parables in the following chapter (Matt. 25). The first tells of ten bridesmaids who wait for a bridegroom. When he finally arrives in the middle of the night, he receives the five who wisely kept oil in their lamps but shuts the door to the five who foolishly let their oil run out. Jesus' second parable tells of a master who, leaving on a long journey, entrusts three of his servants with his money. When he returns, he commends two servants who made wise investments, but condemns the one who only buried his portion in the ground. The third parable, like the first two, warns of a day of judgment that will divide humanity into two groups. Those, "the sheep," who fed and clothed "the least of these" also fed and clothed the Lord, though they did not know the depth and breadth of their actions. The other group, "the goats," who failed to feed and clothe them failed to feed and clothe the Lord, though they too did not know the depth and breadth of their lack of action. All three parables explain and spell out the point in Matthew 24:44: "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Christians through the centuries have long debated when and how this day of judgment will take place. One line of thinking has combined Matthew 24:36-44 with

other apocalyptic passages in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to work out a timeline of events that are already underway or soon to transpire. Representative of this position is Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (a bestseller in the 1970s) or more recently Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind* novels. Like other American fundamentalists, these authors anticipate a day on which God's elect will be raptured—that is, lifted up in their physical bodies to the Lord—while the reprobate are "left behind" to incur God's wrath. We must get ready, because these things may take place yet in our lifetime.

A second line of thinking has seen the day of judgment not at the end of human history but at the time of each individual's death. Each of us will stand before God's judgment seat as soon as we have taken our last breath. We will have to give an accounting of our life and be weighed in the Lord's balance. Again, the lesson is clear: we dare not put off doing what Jesus has commanded. None of us can know when death will overtake us, and then it will be too late. I was just told on Thanksgiving day of a mail carrier in his 50's who was found dead. When I asked about his health, I was told there was no warning of disease!

A third understanding of this passage emphasizes the symbolic character of Jesus' language. The point is not to speculate about a day of judgment sometime in the future, whether at the end of all humanity or at the death of each individual, but rather to confront us with God's radical claims on us here and now. Each day is a day of judgment, so I should always be asking myself, Am I living in the way of Christ? Am I trusting in him alone? Have I allowed myself to be distracted by selfish cares?

Other Christians have combined aspects of these positions, or have developed variations on them. None of these interpretations will be true to the gospel, however, unless they keep the day of judgment firmly in relationship to the new day that has already dawned in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We live between the times! An understanding of the coming kingdom is most faithful to the biblical witness when it reminds us that the Christ who judges us is also the Christ who endured

judgment for our sake; that God's judgment never contradicts or overrides God's grace; and that the readiness to which Jesus calls us is shaped not by fear of the future, but rather by gratitude for life in the kingdom that Christ already offers us.

To live between the times is, above all, to trust and hope that God has begun, and will continue, to transform us more and more into the stature of Christ, in whom all of God's mercy and loving-kindness becomes manifest. Advent calls us into a continuing history of relationship with the Christ who meets us whichever way we turn, whether toward the past, whether toward the present, or whether it is looking toward the future.

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