

**Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room:
Are You Ready?**

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

Advent Sunday

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Matthew 24 is one of those passages that used to keep me awake at night when I was a teenager. I would hear fire-breathing sermons about the dreadful, imminent return of Jesus. He was coming to judge the world and would separate the sheep from the goats. It could be any day, any moment, we were told. Two people will be working in a field. One will be taken to the heavens, the other left to suffer untold misery. So keep awake, be ready, we were admonished.

Well, I stayed awake alright! Worrying if I was good enough. Worrying that I might be the one left behind to suffer untold misery.

And then every few years someone claims to have figured out the date. They take this passage from the book of Revelation, that one from Daniel, apply some special mathematical formula, and poof: a date for Second Coming of Christ. Everybody gets worked up, the date comes, and then nothing. The date comes and goes, and nothing happens. Well, not exactly. Something happens. People roll their eyes at us!

I've always wondered how people who make these predictions interpret the first verse of our text from Matthew 24:

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

I tend to go with the immediate, obvious meaning of a text, and that one is pretty obvious to me. No one knows.

As we begin the Advent season, let me pose a question: what are we to think about the Second Coming of Jesus? My sense is that most people today don't think about it at all. I hear some who claim to believe it literally, that one day soon, very soon, they say, we will hear the blast of a trumpet,

the heavens will open, and Jesus will descend on a cloud of glory to end human history as we know it. That's what they say they believe, but I find it interesting that they are also funding their retirement account, as if they expect to be around for a while!

Others argue that it is just ancient mythology, religious stories that were never intended to be taken literally. Over 2,000 years have passed, they say. Give it up. It's not going to happen.

And somewhere between these two extremes there is a loud silence from those of us who take the Bible seriously and who also think critically. So what is the meaning of this teaching from Matthew 24?

According to our text, we must be agnostic about the timing of the end of time. So, any time you hear someone claiming to have some kind of special knowledge about the end of time, remember what Jesus said in this text. No one knows. Jesus said that even the angels of heaven and he didn't know. So that's something we can give up. We don't have to figure out when it's going to happen.

Instead of crunching the numbers and trying to unravel the mysteries, Jesus challenged his followers to live in a state of readiness, as if this day is our last. He reminded his hearers of the people in Noah's day. They were eating and drinking and getting married. In other words, everything was perfectly normal, until it started to rain. The great flood came suddenly and washed them all away. They weren't ready. Jesus said that two people will be working together in a field. On that day, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be working at a grinding mill; one will be taken and the other left. So be ready this day and every day. That's the message of Jesus. Live every day in a state of readiness.

Reinhold Niebuhr has been called the greatest theologian ever to touch American soil. That's quite a tall claim. No doubt he and his brother Richard were both great theologians. This is what Reinhold Neibuhr says about the Second Coming of Christ. He says that Christians should *live* as though Christ might return within the day, before this day ends. And he says that we should *plan* as though he might not return within our lifetime. Live as though he will return before the day ends but plan as though he will not return within our lifetime. Now, I think that is a pretty good way for us to live with this teaching from Matthew 24. Live as though he will return

before this day is over but make plans as though he will not return during our lifetime.

So Advent begins with a simple question. Are you ready? It's not intended to scare or manipulate anyone. No, it's a challenge to live our best life. Let us all prepare him room by being prepared.

A Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide. Join me as we confess our sins together.