

### **Matthew 24:36-44**

Jesus said [regarding the time of his coming], “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

This is an interesting way to kickoff the Advent season. Here we have a scripture where Jesus is speaking about his return or second coming. Isn't Advent about the lead-in to Jesus' original coming, his birth as a helpless baby in Bethlehem 2000 years ago? I mean, aren't things a little out of order here. Why should we be worried about the second coming — especially because Jesus spoke these words and, as we all know, it hasn't happened yet. After all, it didn't happen in our parents' lifetimes, it didn't happen in our grandparents' lifetimes, it didn't happen during the first millennium. Who knows when or if it will happen at all?

As for me, I will state in no uncertain terms that the God who created the heavens and the earth, all that is, seen and unseen, is perfectly capable of bringing this creation to a close in whatever manner and whatever time God sees fit to do so. I mean, we can't preach about a God who has the power to create unless this same God has the power to change or even destroy what God has created. I mean, God is not like Mickey Mouse in the Sorcerer's Apprentice, who set in motion a series of events he was powerless to stop. No, God is God and we are God's creatures and God has the power to do with us, and the planet we call Earth, and the solar system, and the galaxy, and the universe whatever God pleases. Praise be to God!

Now, this simple fact should not frighten anybody. For some strange reason, we have come to view what Jesus is talking about in today's scripture as something to be feared or even terrified about. He talks of two women grinding meal, one will be taken and the other will be left. Or, two men working the fields, one will be taken and the other will be left.

Certain movie producers, book writers, and preachers have made millions of dollars filming, writing, and talking about the so-called rapture, when Jesus will return and claim those who belong to him and abandon those whom He rejects.

Well, friends, I'm not quite sure that's the way it works. Yes, I can read the scripture. Yes, I can see that Jesus will claim some and not claim others. However, I am not quite sure that what Jesus is talking about necessarily refers to the end of the world, kaboom! What I have observed in those who take this scripture literally is that everyone who reads it and takes it at face value always, always, always assumes that they are going to be the ones who are claimed by Jesus and everyone who disagrees with them are the ones who are going to be, as Tim LaHaye puts it, "Left Behind." Life is real easy when you just assume that you're in and everyone else is out. It's easy to criticize or even hate those who disagree with you because you know you've got the inside track to heaven.

Frankly, those preachers and believers who dare divide the world into those who are in and those who are out repel me. They make me angry. They make me wonder how they can even call themselves Christians. Because, in my humble opinion, the only person who is in a position to judge me is Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the Living God and I know, from scripture, that the judgement of Jesus is far, far different from the judgement of my fellow human beings.

Friends, when Matthew wrote his Gospel two thousand years ago, the one thing most people wanted, at least the poor, the hated, the women, the orphans, the slaves, and the other rejects of society wanted, was an end to the world. These people, the majority of people, saw the world as being an evil place of hatred and oppression where a privileged few controlled the fates of the many, the many to struggled to just get by every day. It is a situation not dissimilar from today, where a mere one percent, or three million people in the United States, have more wealth than the rest of all Americans combined! Wow! Are the top one percent really that special, that smart, that capable? Are they so much more superior than the rest of us? One hardly need to look around to be able to say, no, we've got some really talented people up there who may indeed be worth billions of dollars. But, to tell the truth, there are millions and millions and millions more living on this Earth who are equally capable and equally talented and more than equally moral who could should also be in the top one percent.

So yes, back then and even today there is grotesque unfairness in how wealth and power and justice are distributed in the world. There has to be a better way. Jesus came to this Earth to preach and teach and act to show us a better way. So far, Jesus' better way is hardly the way followed or believed by most people, even those who go to churches and call themselves Christians. Yet, Jesus' preaching, teaching, and acting is still there, still an example, still a goal that he has established for everyone to strive for — even those of us who fall way, way, way short.

We can look at Jesus' second coming in not just one, but at least two ways. Yes, there is the common view that someday in the sweet by-and-by Jesus is going to show up again out of the blue and you and me and all our friends are going to be sucked out of this world by God's Hoover vacuum and we'll watch from above as our enemies get the punishment they deserve. Ha. Ha. Ha.

But if we wait for a moment, we might be able to consider an alternative.

Rather than the big Rapture with a capital "R" in which everything will come to a definitive end for everybody, I prefer to think in terms of a small rapture with a little "r". A rapture in which Jesus may not appear to everybody at once, but definitely will appear to each one of us, individually, not just once, but many times in our lives.

Consider Advent. Consider Christmas. Centuries before Jesus was born, the Scriptures, some of which we read during this Advent season, the Scriptures prophesy that at some point God would

send a Messiah, a Savior, a Christ, who would repair the wide and widening gap that exists between God the Creator and we Human Beings, God's creation. The Messiah, the human being we call Jesus of Nazareth, came to be a living, breathing example of how God would like everyone to live, think, act, and talk. The whole point of being a Christian, the whole point of following Jesus, the whole point of this Advent season, is to embrace in our hearts that Jesus offers us a way of living and being totally different from that of the world in which we live. Yes, as Paul writes, we are all in this world, but we don't have to be of this world. In other words, while we live in the same neighborhoods as everyone else, and shop at the same stores as everyone else, and have the same jobs as everyone else, and watch the same TV's, root for the same sports teams, attend the same schools, etc. etc. etc. as everyone else, we do not have to embrace and we in fact actively reject many of the ideas and attitudes of the world which claim that the rich and powerful are entitled to oppress and abuse others and we, the abused and oppressed simply have to take it. We have a different point of view which states that the most important thing in the world is not power, not money, but love.

Yes, love. And when you think of it, centering your life around love is really, really strange. I mean, in the words of the Tina Turner song, "What's love got to do with it? What's love, but a sweet old-fashioned notion?" Yes, indeed, in a world where most worship the strong, the rich, the powerful, what's love got to do with anything?

But since you're here this morning, you must believe, or at least you must hope that love has a place in the world. That love does actually make a difference, that love can, in some mysterious way, triumph over the values that the world around us embraces. How bizarre, How bizarre!

If, when, we exchange the world's view of how things are supposed to be for Jesus' view of how love defines the way the world is supposed to be, the second coming of Christ takes on a new meaning, a new dimension. Instead of our sitting around waiting for Jesus to show up, sitting on a cloud and floating down from the sky like Glinda the Witch of the North in the Wizard of Oz, the second coming of Christ is not sometime far, far away, but here and now! Jesus is the Son of God and because he is, Jesus can return and literally crash into our lives not just once, but many, many times!

Too often, way too often, we delude ourselves into thinking that God and Jesus are far off. Far off and, in the words of the Bette Midler song, "Watching us from a distance." But as Christians, as daily followers of Jesus Christ, the reality is far different. Rather than watching us from a distance, Jesus is very much here, very much alive, very much with us.

The point of this passage is in life, we can never, ever, know when we will absolutely need Jesus to enter our lives. When we are diagnosed with a serious illness, we need Jesus. When we lose our

jobs, we need Jesus. When our relationships are in trouble, we need Jesus. When our individual, private, closely guarded worlds do fall apart — and we know very, very well that they do and they will again and again and again — we need Jesus.

Today's scripture is not only Good News, it is fantastic news and news is this: At the times in our lives when we least expect it, but also at the times when we most need it, Jesus will come into our lives. Yes, as Jesus puts it, like a thief in the night, he will come to us at the most unexpected times to bless us, to reassure us, to stand with us. Like the men the field or the women grinding grain, Jesus will take us away from the reality in which we are immersed and love us, embrace us, assure us, and guide us so that our shattered dreams and shattered lives can be rebuilt.

The second coming, my friends, is not far away. Rather, it is here and it is now. Every single one of us in this room, and all our friends, and all our families, and all our coworkers, and all our fellow citizens of this nation and of the world are struggling. Yes, struggling. And each of our struggles are very different and each of our struggles are very personal.

But the Good News of life and living is that Jesus knows about all our struggles, all our worries, all our fears. Jesus can and will crash into our lives in unexpected times and in unexpected ways to help us make sense of what is going on and find our way forward.

That is what this season of Advent is truly about: Jesus coming into the world at an unexpected time, in an unexpected place, in an unexpected way. Who could possibly imagine that he Savior of the World would show up as a poor baby — baby — born in a stable full of smelly animals, oppressed by the Roman Empire, yet destined to change the world and introduce and completely new and wonderful way of how to think about life and living.

Now, now, now is the time! Now, now, now is the place! Now, now, now is the way that we can and should and must embrace the ridiculous idea that this baby coming into the world can and will affect our lives and our living for the better at very the times when we least expect it. This is the day when we can say without fear and without doubt, "Come, Lord Jesus," and know He will be there. The truth of life is that when we need him, Jesus will be there. Welcome Advent. Welcome, Lord Jesus. Hallelujah!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.