

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

Jesus said, "But 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 the 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 hour you do not expect.\*

**When is Now**- November 27, 2022

*Matthew 24:36-44*

This morning we begin our countdown to Christmas! Now I know that “Black Friday” has already happened, which, as we know, is the real start to the Christmas season. But from a Christian standpoint, today we begin!

It may seem a bit strange that our countdown begins with Jesus discussing his return. After all, Christmas is all about his first coming into the world. Aren't we putting the proverbial cart ahead of the horse? Our gospel lesson today describes what some call “the rapture.” To some, the rapture is the beginning of Christ's return to earth where he mysteriously summons all his faithful followers at once, draws them up into the air, and sends them off to heaven. Several authors have made a ton of money discussing this phenomenon, speculating on how exactly the rapture would work and what happens to the poor schmucks who get “left behind.”

What simultaneously amuses and enrages me about all this rapture business is that those who really get into prophecies about the second coming and watching for signs that this is the time universally count themselves among those who will be “raptured” or sucked up into the holy vacuum cleaner from heaven. I am quite sure that those holding their breath for the second coming have persuaded themselves that they are perfectly right with God. They are doing all the right things to have earned their place in the heavenly realm. They, of course, totally love their neighbors as themselves and certainly love God first.

You know, folks, it must be really neat to be able to self-select and anticipate God's will. Frankly, I have no shame in confessing to you that I do not always put God first in my life. I do not always love my neighbor as myself. Hey, we just had Thanksgiving! I am sure there are more than a few of us who didn't even love some of their family members as they love themselves.

I am the first to tell you that I am not right with God, not all the time, not 100%. I never was and I never will be. It is not my place and certainly not within my knowledge or wisdom to determine my score in St. Peter's book.

Now I don't want to get all theological with you today, but one of the nice things about being a Presbyterian is that worrying about my status with God is decidedly not something I have to worry about. The good news is that you don't have to worry about it. In fact, the question of accumulating enough “points” to make it into heaven is not even on our radar screen.

So many Christians believe that our right actions guarantee our ticket to heaven. Let me tell you, right actions, however you define them to be, cannot and will not by themselves get us raptured or put us in the rapid pass line to the heavenly Disney World. Jesus made it clear. None of us, not one of us, is good enough, perfect enough, holy enough to get that stamp on our eternal life passports.

So what? Does that mean how we speak and act on this earth doesn't matter? Does anything go? Is everyone in, regardless of how they live their lives? That friends, is not my place to say. Sorry if I disappoint you.

The point is that the coming of Jesus into the world represents a complete break with how we are to imagine our relationship with God. Jesus was a Jew, born into a Jewish household, raised in a Jewish nation, taught by Jewish rabbis and totally versed in the Jewish scriptures. From his upbringing he knew that God's relationship with the Jewish people was one of what they called a "covenant." A covenant is an agreement between two groups or individuals spelling out various actions each was to do for and with the other. It was a binding legal contract.

The fundamental idea of Judaism back then and today is that God made a special agreement with a select group of people. What the agreement boiled down to is that God promised to take care of these people, to bless them, insure their prosperity, and keep them safe from outsiders. God did this on the condition that his chosen people would do their best to obey the laws God gave them. The Ten Commandments were the foundation of the law. There were an additional 613 laws specified in the Jewish writings. On top of that, there were many unwritten traditions and practices that developed over the centuries which further defined the original laws.

The whole point is that obeying the laws, the right actions, guaranteed God's blessings and protection.

Now for the Jews around the time of Jesus, it was quite clear to them that this covenant worked. Judaism is a religion steeped in history, starting with the call of Abraham to move from Iraq to Israel, to Moses, leading the people out of Egypt back to Israel, to David who established the Kingdom and laid the basis for the nation to be prosperous. They also remember what happened when they fell away from God and the nation was destroyed. The Jews remembered their time in exile in Babylon when it appeared they had lost everything.

But for the Jewish people, the miracle was that despite their disobedience to God and God's Laws, God did not forget God's agreement with Israel. That truly was the remarkable thing, the fact that held the nation together and still holds the Jewish people together.

The one essential truth that the Jews of Jesus' time and the Jews of today can utterly rely on is that God was, is, and will be faithful to them regardless. The Jews put their covenant, their contract, to the ultimate test: they disobeyed God so much that God allowed the nation of Babylon to capture and destroy Israel and take them into exile. But God was not finished with them. Amazingly, impossibly, astonishingly, God allowed the Jews to return to Israel and start all over again. God did not forget God's agreement with God's people. God is faithful even when the people are not. That is the true miracle.

After all, history is full of thousands upon thousands of human civilizations which no longer exist. There are endless numbers of nations and religions — some of which we know about, most of which we will never know about — that are gone and their people absorbed into a larger tribe or nation. But the Jews have endured. They have endured for over 3500 years! Astonishingly the Jews have spent well over half those years without a home. Yet the Jews endured because they believed in their covenant with their God. There is no other nation on earth that can claim something similar. If you want proof of the existence of God, look no further than persistence of the Jewish religion.

Friends, the secret behind the continued existence of the Jews lies not in action. We have seen that time and again, the Jews failed to obey God's laws. But what has enabled the Jews to survive in spite of everything is their ongoing faith in God. It is faith, not action, that comes first in our relationship with God. Faith, not action, is what should motivate our daily living.

Jesus came into the world to inspire us to first, last, and always believe. We are here to believe, believe, believe. Always believe.

When we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we believe that we are here on this earth because a loving, just, God has put us here to live in harmony with each other and with the magnificent creation God has given to us.

Now to some, it may sound like I'm splitting hairs. But here is the question we must answer: do we believe in God mostly because when we act the "right way," whatever that is, we will receive a heavenly reward?

Or, do we act, think, talk as we do in the world, because faith tells us that God is good all the time and from our faith in God will naturally flow right acting and right speaking, and right loving of each other and all of creation?

Our Presbyterian answer is that faith comes first. We believe, and so we will act in accordance with our faith. It is not at all about earning points — no one can possibly “earn” enough “points” to get into eternal life with God.

Rather, Jesus is all about having the faith that he is with us all the time, throughout this journey called life and beyond. If and when we believe Jesus is here and now, then the idea of rapture is dismissed for the nonsense that it is.

Today’s scripture is not about some supernatural moment when the good sheep will be suddenly separated from the bad goats of life. No! Jesus is indeed talking about separating people. But the separation does not depend on our own selfish ideas of how many points we have scored.

For Jesus, we are separated from each other by our faith.

Every day, every day of our lives we are separated by our faith from those who do not have faith. Every day, we can all remember something that happened to us that put us in the position of choosing whether to Trust God or Trust ourselves.

The second coming, friends, is not a once-and-for-all event. The second coming of Jesus is happening to us all the time! We celebrate Christmas because we proclaim with confidence that Almighty God came into the world as a human being named Jesus. That means God in Jesus Christ understands us. He “gets us.” He knows our doubts, fears, frailties, temptations, sicknesses, as well as joys, loves, and triumphs. Jesus knows all about being human and that should be a source of inexpressible hope and confidence for us every single day we live on this earth.

But the second coming can be understood as being that “God is with us” right now. Yes, God is here right now and when we have faith, no matter how bad things seem to be, we are “raptured” when we believe that in Jesus Christ, there is nothing we can’t handle together.

The Apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans: For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we have faith in Jesus, when we believe he is with us in all the joys and all the difficulties of life, we can endure, grow, and triumph. In Jesus we have the advantage that others do not. By faith we know that we are loved — and isn’t that truly all we need to know?

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