

Matthew 24:36-44

“Hey, We’re Almost Ready – But What For?”

In the summer of 1980, I saw my first musical in a big city. It was “A Chorus Line” at a theater in Dallas, Texas and I was enthralled. I immediately bought the album, (for you youngsters, that’s how old people listened to music when I was in college) and listened to it almost continually. It drove my roommate crazy because she was unfamiliar with the songs. And it resulted in me knowing every word to every song, even to this day!

When I started reading the passage from Matthew, I found myself quoting a line from “Hello Twelve, Hello Thirteen, Hello Love”, from that musical. It is a song that describes the sentiments of tweens, that time between adolescence and the emotionally volatile teenage years. These feeling are: “Hey, I’m almost ready, but what for?”

That is a good summary of Matthew’s text, both for the original hearers and readers today. Remember, Matthew wrote these words some 20-30 years after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus told his followers to go to Jerusalem and wait for him after he returned to Heaven. They did and forty days later, the promised Holy Spirit came down and filled all who were waiting, and the church was born.

But they were also told that Jesus would come again and reign in glory for all time. So people were wondering what in the heck was going on? They had waited twenty, thirty years and no Jesus! They might just have been saying, “Hey, we’re almost ready – BUT WHAT FOR?” After all, everyone had curiosity about what the end of times would look like, but even more about when it would occur.

Well, society had not changed in the last two thousand years. Because people are not only waiting, but many sit around, newspaper in hand trying to line up the stars or discern how the current news is a sign of Jesus' return and asking the same question. We can see this by the fascination with "The Late, Great Planet Earth" in the '70's and the popularity of the "Left Behind" series in the late '90's. Theologian Karl Barth has named this "living between the times". Liturgically we might call this Advent. Here's why.

Some people think the whole emphasis on Christ coming again is much ado about nothing. After all this time, if Christ WERE coming, he would have done it by now. Look how often we have needed him. *They are victims of perpetual apathy.* Others, however, start the day with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. They are searching for signs for the end of times, *living in perpetual anxiety.* Matthew's Jesus calls us to live in faith and hope. And that is what Advent is about.

Matthew reminds people of every age that neither apathy nor anxiety will benefit us because NO ONE, NOT EVEN JESUS, knows when this cataclysmic day is coming. His message is that we need to be ready all of the time. And then he tells us how to do it.

First, as followers of the one true God, we are to remember the covenant promises of God to the chosen people Israel. We do this by recalling that our God is a God who is sovereign over all things – people, places and circumstances. God is a God who creates, judges and recreates and will continue to do this until God decides to bring us all into the New Jerusalem.

Jesus way of getting us all to this point is to remind us of the great flood. God created the earth and everything in it and God deemed all creation to be good. But as soon as humanity was given freewill, we exercised our right to make bad choices and it all went downhill from there. Ultimately, God judged by sending a flood of enormous proportions. And no one saw it coming.

People were eating, drinking, marrying, planning for the future and making fun of their crazy neighbor Noah, out building a boat in the middle of a desert. Yet, in the matter of days, all was lost. All except those that God chose to save to begin a new creation with. This sets the pattern for the entire Old Testament.

God's people strayed from the covenant and were sent into Egypt to live in slavery and oppression. Out of God's grace, God sent Moses to deliver them back to the Promised Land. Once they saw it, they doubted God's intentions to give it to them and paid for their sins by spending forty years looking at their home but unable to enter. Until a new generation of faithful people was born. And so on and so on and so on.

Matthew also reminds us of a second promise that God made during all of these years that God's people wandered, whether literally or figuratively – the promise of a Messiah! For hundreds of years, God's prophets said, "Live in obedience. Keep alert. God is sending a savior to deliver you – from the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Romans" or whatever people God was using to judge the sins of the times.

And though many doubted and followed other gods, the remnant of God's people continued to wait in faith and hope. God kept that promise, too. Still, many of those people did not recognize the Messiah when he arrived. The Gospel of John says is best when he wrote: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." (John 1:11)

Which brings us to the message of Advent. Be vigilant. Be prepared. But while the apathetic and the anxious think this is just about the end of times, Matthew tells us it is more about today. This very minute. You see, if we all knew what time and day that Jesus was coming, we would be living as close to perfect Christian lives as we possibly could. But we don't.

Or to paraphrase the text in more modern day vernacular. It is unlikely that the thief who is coming to steal your large screen TV and sell it for drugs will send you a text first, so maybe you should get in habit of locking your doors and even install a security system. BE READY NOW. THIS MINUTE.

I know I have told this story before, but it illustrates Matthew's point so perfectly that I am banking on the "no one remembers what the preacher says thirty minutes after they leave church" theory and telling it again.

When I first started serving as Chaplain at the Presbyterian Community, I assumed – mistakenly – that the pastor would be the most important person there. I found out quickly how wrong I was – it is the beautician! These ladies in their 80's and 90's have been getting their hair done on a certain day for decades and nothing will change their plan. Not even the Second Coming!

One particular lady, who lived to be 102, was so upset that I had weekly devotions at the same time that she got her hair done. She mentioned feeling guilty about it often. But Friday at 1:30 had been her time for years and she was NOT going to change. She used to say, "I guess I will just *have* to choose the beauty parlor because if Jesus comes again, I want my hair to look nice." And I would say, "It's okay Miss Lib, just leave a note for him on your pillow that says, 'In the beauty parlor until 3:00, please come back then.'"

But that is not how it works. So God calls us to live in thanks and praise *while we are waiting* and that is what Advent is about. Not about living in the apathy of doomsday and throwing up our hands and doing nothing. Not about looking for sure signs in national politics and natural disasters so that anxiety wins the day. But by continually living faithful lives in hope

that Jesus will come when God is ready and will say to you and me, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

This means living what I call “cross-shaped lives.” This is done in two ways. First, we must work each day on the vertical beam of the cross of Jesus by deepening our personal relationship with God. Not just working for God or performing good deeds, but actually spending time WITH God.

When I was a young adult, in what I refer to as my seeking years, I was attending a circle meeting one day. This was at the time in my life where I was a former professional businesswoman turned stay-at-home mom who had not realized that raising children is the biggest honor and hardest job ever given. So, I was the room mother every year, volunteering constantly, trying to justify my existence.

And church – well that was on a whole other level. I sang in the choir, rang in the bell choir, directed the Children’s choir, served as a Circle Chairman, Secretary of the Women of the Church, visited the shut-ins, etc. Well, at circle, this friend read a devotional that described a woman whose life could have been my own. She was more of human DOING than she was a human BEING. And as the story was read, I was picturing myself as the heroine. The star.

Then, I got the rug pulled right out from under me. You see, the story ended with the woman getting to Heaven and God saying, “You cannot come in because I don’t know you.” WHAT? Was her question – and mine. But remember Lord, I was the one who taught Sunday School and baked cookies for the caroling event every year and drove the elderly to the doctor and chaperoned Middle Schoolers to the beach for God’s sake. And the Lord replied, “I see all of the good works that you performed but I still do not know you.”

Advent is a reminder that first and foremost, we are to be still and know God. Listen in the quiet for what God has to say. Seek the Lord with all your heart and mind and soul in prayer and music and nature and whatever way God comes to you.

And **then**, work on the horizontal beam of the cross. After you know the ONE you are serving. After you recognize the baby, not just in the manger, but in the world and in your own life. After you understand the humility that is needed to be a true servant, just to be sure that your intentions are pure and not about making yourself feel good, THEN you can live in service while you wait.

Friends, Advent is about watchfulness. But it is not about numbers and signs and vision and symbols. It has nothing to do with predictions and everything to do with “living in the expectation that the teachings and example of Jesus are the norm” (1) no matter when Jesus returns. It is about contrasting the things of the world with the things of God. Advent invites us to consider once again what it means to be living between the times.

When we do this, we must anticipate God’s judgement of evil as well as our own wrongdoings, yet knowing all the while that God will ultimately put ALL SIN – even our own-even death - under God’s feet. And we must live in thanks and praise for the promises kept and the ones yet to be fulfilled.

Friends, let us trust and hope that what God has begun will continue to transform us day by day into the stature of Jesus Christ. All the while knowing that God, in and through the life, death and resurrection of the child in the manger, has placed a radical claim on our lives. And **that** will be our Advent. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf
Nazareth Presbyterian Church, December 1, 2019

(1) Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, Connections, Year A. Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 15

