



“Keep Awake!”
”Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
November 28 2010
Matthew 24:36-44

Let’s see a show of hands. How many of you have already begun to shop for Christmas? Played Christmas music? How many have started to decorate for Christmas? Now that Thanksgiving is behind us, most of us have turned our eyes toward Christmas. But, beware; each year on the first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary holds up a stern “Warning” sign. Not so fast, the Scriptures implore!

Before we sing the great hymns that trumpet the birth of Jesus, before we read the stories that recall the innocent babe in the manger, before we remember the one who sheds light in the darkness, we are cautioned to look, not back, but forward. Before we remember the past, the lectionary grabs us by the lapels and forces us to ponder an apocalyptic day in the future.

A friend of mine writes, “Quite unlike the syrupy sentimentality that the rest of the world will marinate in this December, the Church begins Advent with a reminder to cultivate an ultimate sense of urgency. We never start Advent with something soft and baby-blue, or with carols about the manger, or with people holding candles and singing ‘Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.’ We never start Advent with something charmingly domestic and sweet and tranquil. We start it instead with an apocalyptic text like this one which is nothing if not a jarring appeal for urgency.”¹

Writings in both the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament speak of a future time when God’s kingdom of justice and peace will reign on earth. Today’s passage is one in a series in Matthew’s gospel that speak of a day of judgment that will inaugurate the kingdom. When will this day be? Matthew says that no one but God knows the day. And he means no one. No human beings know the day, the angels don’t know, not even Jesus knows. Only God knows. Thus, it will come as a complete surprise.

Our passage says that it will be similar to Noah’s turbulent day. “Before the flood came, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.” Referring to people eating and drinking does not mean they were gluttons and drunkards. It simply means they were going about their normal routines, blissfully unaware of the impending doom. And people were marrying and giving in marriage, that is, “people presumed that there would be a future; they assumed there was time for another generation to be born.”² Then the skies darkened and it started to sprinkle. Noah gathered his family into the arc. Soon the skies began to pour and Noah battened down the hatches. The surging waters began to rage and all but Noah’s family were swept away in a great flood.

It's hard to miss the point. Matthew is saying, "Do not continue living as if God makes no demands on your life. Do not put off until another day living a Christ-like existence, because it is much closer to midnight than you think. Keep awake, for you do not know what day your Lord is coming."

Year after year on the first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary serves up passages that focus not on the coming of the Babe in Bethlehem, but rather, the second coming of Christ – what our text from Matthew calls "the coming of the Son of Man." It's essential to keep in mind that the early Christian community emerged at a time when apocalyptic thought was pervasive. Apocalypticism is the belief that the present world will soon come to an end. Chaos and catastrophe will reign, then God will defeat evil for all time, and God's kingdom of peace and justice will be established.

The early Christian community was witnessing calamitous events and so it seemed reasonable to believe that they were living in the final days before God's kingdom burst onto the scene. The Roman army occupied Palestine and oppressed both the Jewish community and the early Christians. The world seemed to be in the throes of evil and the future looked grim. Jesus taught his followers to pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." The people were pleading with God, "It is a terrific mess down here, PLEASE, may your kingdom come!" Thus, this apocalyptic vision of the coming of the Son of Man was a compelling message of hope. Instead of a threat, it was seen as a promise that God was about to set everything right.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew, however, had a problem on his hands. The first Christians believed the return of Christ was imminent. A few years passed, then a decade, then another decade. When Matthew was writing, some 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus some still held out hope that the new age was just around the corner, but many were beginning to think that Christ was never coming back. And if Christ was never coming back, then why live a Christ-like existence? Why extend compassion to people in need? Why demand justice for people who are harassed and persecuted? Why wage peace?

Matthew wrote, "Keep awake, you do not know when your Lord is coming." God is not going to run an infomercial on Cable TV. God is not going to post an announcement on Facebook so that everyone who has been friended will know the day!

Matthew says it is going to come as a shocker to most people. It's going to happen when we least expect it. He says, "If the owner of the house knew when the thief was going to break in, he would stay awake and not be surprised." But, of course, the thief comes at an unexpected moment.

It's odd that he would compare the coming of Jesus to a thief breaking into a house, but his point is that we need to always be watching for Christ, because he will come at an unexpected moment.

Today's passage is the first of five passages that warn us to be ready. We want to be found living a Christ-like existence. We do not want to be judged lacking.

The passage that follows today's passage tells of two servants. One does what his master desires, the other blows off his responsibilities because he thinks the Master won't be home any time soon. Of course the Master shows up before the unfaithful servant expects and the judgment is severe.

The third passage is of the wise and foolish maidens. The wise maidens are ready for the bridegroom's return and they are welcomed into the wedding banquet. The foolish maidens are off somewhere else and are shut out of the banquet.

The fourth passage tells of three servants being entrusted with riches. When the Master returns, the first two have used their riches to reap greater rewards for their master. The third servant is judged for doing nothing with what was entrusted to him.

That brings us to the fifth in this series of passages about Christ returning unexpectedly. It is the well-known text of the final judgment when the Son of Man will separate people like a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. Jesus welcomes the sheep into his kingdom saying, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous answer, “Lord when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?” And the king answers “Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”

We often shy away from mentioning judgment because Jesus revealed God as a loving parent who forgives us when we fall short and who saves us by grace. However, God’s love does not cancel all judgment. Judgment points to the fact that there are consequences to how we live. We are faced with constant choices and it makes a difference whether we reach out to someone in need with compassion or if we ignore them. It makes a difference whether we take up a cause of justice or let injustice win the day. It matters whether we strive for peace or provoke dissension and war.

I do not believe Christ is coming one final time at the end of history to vanquish all evil and to set the world right in an instant. I believe Christ is constantly coming to us in the faces of people in need. It is the “Day of the Lord” each time a decision is at hand. And, we are foolish if we think we can live according to the values of our culture day after day, and not get our act together until the final hour. “The arrival of the Son of Man will take place in times like Noah’s. Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a wonderful time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing – until the flood hit and swept everything away.”³

In 2003, shortly before I had my first interview with Westminster’s Pastor Nominating Committee, I interviewed with a church in Atlanta. The chair of that committee, George Brumley, and three other committee members came to Virginia to hear me preach. Following worship, they came to our house for lunch and to have an initial conversation. Two months later, I was shocked to read in the newspaper that George Brumley, his wife, his children, his grandchildren – 12 family members in all – died when their charter plane slammed into Mount Kenya. One moment they were having the trip of a lifetime, the next moment, it was all over. If you do not know your life can end that unexpectedly, it’s time to wake up. It’s time to stop putting off the God-centered life you plan to live some day. Act now to become loving and generous. Do not delay becoming passionate about justice and peace. It’s time to wake up and to start living today, the life God yearns for you to live.

Recently, I found out something I had not known about the Brumley family. The Christmas prior to their plane crash, they gave friends a framed copy of a 2,000 year-old Sanskrit poem. The poem includes these words:

Yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow is but a vision,
But today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day.⁴
Live well this day, because you and I do not know the day or the hour.

NOTES

1. Theodore J. Wardlaw, "Ethics and Eschatology," December 2, 2004.
2. William Herzog II, "Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p.23.
3. Matthew 24:37-39 as translated in *The Message*.
4. Joanna Adams, "Heads Up," December 2, 2007.