

Advent Series: “Prepare to Meet Your God”
Keeping Watch

Matthew 24:36-44

** ³⁶ “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

** ⁴² “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

** Open with scene from “Evan Almighty”

Elapsed time: 00:52:22 – 00:56:11

Evan Almighty (Universal Pictures, 2007), directed by Tom Shadyac

You know what I find interesting about this scene? Here’s this modern day Noah, a respected man, a congressman even... and the people around him are able to incorporate all the “weirdness” going on about him – the birds flying in the window, the animals showing up in a government building, his sudden hair growth, the long beard, the robes... they can ‘work with this’ as the PR person says. *Until...* he tells them that he is doing these weird things because “God told him to.”

And that’s it... then he is in contempt, he is rejected, he’s forcibly removed from the room. Now, this is comedy, but there is truth here too, don’t you think? See, there’s a sequence of events that almost always happens spiritually to people who choose to follow God, and that sequence is being illustrated in this movie. It goes something like this:

** **1. We become followers of Christ** – responding to God’s reaching out to us.

** **2. That commitment changes the way we live.** Noticeably! Which leads to #3 -

** **3. The ‘reviews’ will be mixed.** Some people will be blessed, and interested in what is happening in us, but others will react with hostility. Jesus put it bluntly, “Don’t expect the world to love you. The world will hate you on account of me.”

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Keeping Watch

So, you get the impression as you read the Gospels that a decision to follow Christ can never be a casual thing... its not a *‘preference’*, it’s not ‘one part of me’ in distinction to all the other things I ‘do’. It’s not something that we ‘do’ on Sundays (or Saturdays) or during Advent and Lent, and then set aside the rest of the year while we tend to other more urgent parts of our lives.

A decision to follow Christ is one that we make not *once*, but hundreds of times, thousands of times... every day, as we meet up with that opposition that Jesus warned us about, as we come across the daily obstacles that would side track us, or even turn us away altogether. Jesus’ very invitation: “Follow Me” implies continuing action. It’s not a one time, ‘glad I got that out of the way’ kind of thing. It’s a decision that affects every part of our life from that moment on, to eternity.

Now, I bring that up today (and showed you that film clip) because our Scripture reading (which is from the Lectionary) is Jesus using the illustration of Noah to make the point that one day he – Jesus – is going to come back, and his coming will be unannounced. I’d say “unexpected” but I think the point of this passage is that we *should* expect it, we *need* to be preparing for it, we just don’t know when it will be. Or, put it like this: we don’t know *when* Jesus will return, but we should live as if it could be *today*.

Jesus opens this teaching section in the Gospel of Matthew with these words: “*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*” To understand his reference to “*that day or hour*”, we need to look back in chapter 24 of Matthew, where we see that he is referring to the *second* coming of the Messiah (himself). In talking about this, Jesus quotes from the book of Isaiah, chapter 13, and he is clearly associating his second coming with the prophecy of Isaiah.

Well, that passage echoes a very familiar theme in the Old Testament prophets: “The Day of the Lord”. Not to get too bogged down in this, but basically, the “Day of the Lord” in the old and New Testament was about one thing, and only one thing: judgment. Listen to these words from the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 13: 9 – 13 (this is the context of the verse that Jesus quotes)

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- ⁹ See, the day of the LORD is coming
—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—
to make the land desolate
and destroy the sinners within it.
- ¹⁰ The stars of heaven and their constellations
will not show their light.
The rising sun will be darkened
and the moon will not give its light.
- ¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil,
the wicked for their sins.
- ** I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty
and will humble the pride of the ruthless.
- ¹² I will make people scarcer than pure gold,
more rare than the gold of Ophir.
- ¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble;
and the earth will shake from its place
at the wrath of the LORD Almighty,
in the day of his burning anger.

This is a very familiar theme of the prophets. (Those exact words are used 27 times in TNIV!) And what we see here in Matthew 24, is Jesus taking on that ‘mantle’, i.e., Jesus saying, “I am the agent of God’s judgment”, “The Day of the Lord” *is* “The Day of Christ’s return”. Now one might say that this is good news, and bad news. The theologian Fredrick Buchener put it like this:

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.¹

So, this is Good News for those who have received the grace and forgiveness of God that is offered to us in Christ. It is not so good news for those who choose to reject his grace, or continually put off their decision about who will ultimately rule their life. (And of course, no decision *is* a decision.) It may make us uncomfortable, but there is no universalism in the New Testament. If there is anything clear about Jesus’ teaching, it is that our choices in this life have eternal consequences. And our time is limited.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (Harper Collins, 1993), p. 58

Advent Series: "Prepare to Meet Your God"
Keeping Watch

** William Willimon, a United Methodist bishop, author, and a powerful preacher, shared this in a sermon:

Early in my ministry, I served a little church in rural Georgia. One Saturday we went to a funeral in a little country church not of my denomination. I grew up in a big downtown church. I had never been to a funeral like this one. The casket was open, and the funeral consisted of a sermon by their preacher.

The preacher pounded on the pulpit and looked over at the casket. He said, "It's too late for Joe. He might have wanted to get his life together. He might have wanted to spend more time with his family. He might have wanted to do that, but he's dead now. It is too late for him, but it is not too late for you. There is still time for you. You still can decide. You are still alive. It is not too late for you. Today is the day of decision."

Then the preacher told how a Greyhound bus had run into a funeral procession once on the way to the cemetery, and that that could happen today. He said, "You should decide today. Today is the day to get your life together. Too late for old Joe, but it's not too late for you."

I was so angry at that preacher. On the way home, I told my wife, "Have you ever seen anything as manipulative and insensitive to that poor family? I found it disgusting."

She said, "I've never heard anything like that. It was manipulative. It was disgusting. It was insensitive. Worst of all, it was also true."²

** This is part one in a series of messages that I'll be sharing during Advent called "Prepare to Meet Your God". That preparation is the historical theme of Advent, and we'll be talking about how we might do that. Today the message is about keeping watch – about what it means to be people who live with an expectation of Christ's return. Next week we're going to look at John the Baptist and his message of repentance. I don't think I need to add (unless you don't know me yet) that as Advent is a preparation time for the most amazing miracle this world has ever encountered – the Incarnation – that this entire series is ultimately about God's grace. But, I am – as I always try to be – going to be honest with you. So we need to see this: There is no salvation if there is nothing to 'be saved *from*'. You know what I mean? Jesus' warnings about 'the end' have meaning... and we need to hear them, even if we hear them in the context of God's love and mercy.

² Will Willimon, in his sermon "The Writing on the Wall," PreachingToday.com

Advent Series: “Prepare to Meet Your God”
Keeping Watch

The New Testament writers agree with the Old Testament writers from beginning to end that our decisions today have eternal consequences. One day this life, and this age, will end. We all will one day stand before Christ and give an account of our lives.

** Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4: 5 to remind us not to try and figure out the eternal destinies of other people... but we should be concerned about our own!

So be careful not to jump to conclusions before the Lord returns as to whether or not someone is faithful. When the Lord comes, he will bring our deepest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives and then God will give to everyone whatever praise is due.

Jesus put it (judgment) in terms of a shepherd separating the “sheep from the goats” – those who lived the life and those who did not will be separated in the end. Now, the purpose of Christ’s first coming was to provide a means for us to receive forgiveness for our sins, so that we would be able to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Believers will be, as we say, ‘covered by the Blood of Christ’. But, these warning passages, like Matthew 24, are pointing to something very important.

** Just after the passage we just read in 1 Corinthians (vs. 20) Paul also says,
For the Kingdom of God is not just fancy talk; it is living by God’s power.

And this is exactly what Jesus will be looking for when he returns. It is not a weighing of Good Deeds vs. Bad Deeds on some giant balance scale... to see what our final destination will be. It is rather, a weighing of our “private motives” as we read above... a testing which will illuminate the direction that we have chosen for our life. It’s not a question of whether or not we’ve sinned, or messed up. We’ve all sinned, we’ve all fallen short of God’s glory. In Christ we’re forgiven... judgment will look deeper than simply at external behaviors, examining the issue: ‘who did we live for?’

** I’ve been very influenced in my understanding of God’s judgment by a short book (a novel, actually) by C. S. Lewis called The Great Divorce. Lewis once called this the ‘favorite of all his writings’.

Advent Series: “Prepare to Meet Your God”
Keeping Watch

The book is about, of all things, a bus trip from hell. (Now, some of you might think I’m describing your last vacation, but this is really hell, as C. S. Lewis pictured it.)

The book opens at a bus stop, in an area of semi-darkness. And without getting into too much detail, we see Lewis’ chilling description of hell as a place where people are constantly trying to get away from each other, into further darkness and isolation. Another man at the stop explains to the main character (Clive) that a distant pinpoint of light on the horizon is actually the closest neighbor, and he had only been there a short time... all the others have moved so far that they will never make it back to this ‘bus stop’.

Well, the bus is a bus to heaven. And it leaves from this spot every day. It is free, anyone can come, and even more amazing, they don’t need to return. Ever! They can go to heaven and stay there. So, some people get on, and it turns out that they are not traveling ‘up’ so much as they are enlarging... hell is a tiny place tucked in between some blades of grass on the ‘outskirts’ of heaven. (You have to love Lewis’ imagery!)

The people get off... where they are met by ‘guides’. One for each of them. These are volunteers who chose to put aside the glory of heaven to come to this fringe place, and lead the people who come up on the bus from the shadowland of hell into the reality of God’s presence. The bus travelers find that they have a hard time there at first. The grass cuts their feet because (for now) they are so *insubstantial* compared to everything in this place. It is too bright, too ‘hard’ too ‘real’ for them; it is very uncomfortable. But they are encouraged by their guides to stay, and come further in”...

But, here’s the point: throughout the book, one by one... the bus riders give up and return to the bus. Why? Because their lives were based on denial of the truth, or on selfishness, or their unwillingness to allow God’s point of view to take control because they loved some *thing* on earth more than God... and even there in the shadow of God himself, with eternity on the line... they are unwilling to let go of whatever delusion or lie they clung to in this life, the very things that kept them *out* of this beautiful, glorious, Kingdom in the first place.

Advent Series: “Prepare to Meet Your God”
Keeping Watch

See, Lewis believed that God’s judgment was ‘a revelation’, a *revealing* not of ‘one single choice that we either made or didn’t make’ at some point in our lives – not whether or not we ‘prayed the Jesus prayer’ as a kid, or whenever; but rather, it was the revealing of all our life’s choices.

Has our life been about *us*, or was it about *God*? And much more revealing than our words, it will be our actions that will be tested. Which brings us back to Jesus’ warning in Matthew 24. “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

** How can we be ready?

By living for Christ. By rejecting the lie that ‘I have time to pull it all together... someday.’ By realizing that every choice we make every day is not only revealing something about our character, our ultimate commitment, about the ground of our being, each choice is cementing those choices. Each decision is a further determination of who we are – and will be forever. One day, that truth will be illuminated – to us, and to everyone.

And in that day some will hear the voice of the Master, sadly stating... “I never knew you.” And others will hear the joyful call, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. You made a lot of mistakes, you tried my patience at times, but I always knew that you were trying to live for me. In your heart you loved me more than this world. Come, my beloved... come home!”

God is never unjust, and the Scriptures tell us that even those who are rejected will affirm the righteousness of God’s judgments (One day every knee will bow, and every tongue confess...”).

** We read in 1 Peter, “*The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.*”³

If our lives are about living for God, then preparation means doing all we can to stay on track, keeping our focus, casting off anything that might derail us. If the truth of our lives is that we are

³ 1 Peter 3: 9

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Keeping Watch

running away from God as fast as we can, then we need to turn around. That is what repentance is, and we’ll be talking about that next week.