

“Right On Time”

Matthew 24: 36-44, by Marshall Ziemann, preached 12-1-2019 at PCOC

Each December, when we finally get to Advent, we are expecting to hear about Jesus’ birth - angels, shepherds, the manger and the Magi. Our Advent Scripture readings, however, always surprise us. Last week, on Christ the King Sunday, we looked back to the day he was crucified. Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary readings always take us forward, to Jesus’ second Advent, the day he will return to judge the nations and reign as King.

This pattern of readings is meant to teach us something important (*please remember this*): When we remember his humble birth, we must also connect it to the fact he is our cosmic King. When we remember his first coming, so long ago in Bethlehem, we can never separate it from his second coming, which humanity has been waiting for ever since.

Towards the end of his ministry, Jesus himself began to speak of his return, often with dramatic imagery. Finally, the disciples pull Jesus aside, and ask him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Matthew chapter 24 (our text for today) is a long answer about this. In today’s verses, to help us to begin preparing to celebrate Christmas, our lectionary schedule calls for us to Hear Jesus’ Words about his return, (his second Advent) one day in the future. Advent begins by talking about the End. From the gospel of Matthew, chapter 24, we begin today in verse 36. Jesus says:

³⁶“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on *what* day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

“Be *ready*,” Jesus said, “while you’re waiting.” In your waiting, make sure you’re ready.

I would imagine that most of don’t like to wait. (Is there anybody here who does enjoy waiting?) When we do have to wait, most of us don’t do it very well. Whenever I am waiting someplace - at the doctor or dentist, in line at the grocery store, even in the car at a red light, I look around and people are always on their phones. How did we use to wait before cell phones?

“Make sure you’re ready,” Jesus said, because when he returns, it’s going to surprise us. From this passage we can summarize Jesus’ teaching: Nobody knows when (even Jesus himself didn’t know, he said). It will be sudden, like before a flood. We should keep awake, alert. It will be unexpected.

I’ve said before that most of Jesus’ followers, especially when hearing Jesus’ words like this, expected him to return soon. If you’d have told them that he would tarry at least another 2000 years, they would have been shocked.

But he told them to wait, and waiting still, we are. But how we wait is the key. The main thing Jesus said about waiting was: Be Ready. And so Jesus told stories about being ready - about the 10 bridesmaids who were to wait before the bridegroom shows up in the middle of the night. Five were ready, and five weren’t.

In your pew Bibles, the word “wait” or “waiting” appears over 200 times. The phrase “Wait on the Lord” occurs some 40 times. Apparently, God’s People were no strangers to waiting, and God sent them, throughout the Bible, numerous instructions on how to wait. How many of these sound familiar?

From the Psalms:

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!
 (Psalm 27:14) Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. (Psalm 33:20)
 I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. (Psalm 40:1)
 My soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning (Psalm 130:6).

And in the New Testament:

John the Baptist’s disciples asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Luke 7:19). After his resurrection, the risen Christ told his disciples “not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). James writes, “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord...[as] the farmer waits for the... crop” (James 5:7). Peter wrote, “We wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet 3:13).

God’s People waited a lot, it seems. That doesn’t mean that they always liked it. The summary of the message of the Prophet Habakkuk goes something like this: “Where is the God of Heaven, and Why is He Taking So Long?” You’ve probably muttered the same thing at times in your life. Waiting is a great concept, until we actually have to do it.

Each year in the Season of Advent, we remember three different aspects of waiting on God:

- We remember how the People of God waited centuries for their Messiah until at “just the right time,” “in the fullness of time,” Christ was born.
- We count down the days with our children, waiting for Christmas to get here this year.
- All the while we are looking forward to that Great Day when Christ will return to Earth to reign as King.

“In your waiting,” Jesus said, “be ready.” Leadership Expert Stan Toler wrote a book entitled, “God is Never Late; He’s Seldom Early; He’s Always Right on Time.”

It’s that aspect of God always being right on time that we should focus on today and I want you to ask yourself, “How has God’s timing been ‘right on time’ for me?”

Let’s consider together those decisions or circumstances where the timing was just right:

- Maybe how you met your spouse (how your paths intersected at just the right time)
- That job opening that occurred right when you were looking (timing that you couldn’t control)
- Maybe it was something that happened early on in your life - a coach or teacher who came along to guide you, the college choice you made, a scholarship that opened up, the internship you took and the people you met.
- Or maybe it was a challenge or setback that came your way which in turn helped you to grow. Twice in my life I’ve had my car stolen and each time God gave me the faith to hunt for my stolen car and then the courage when I found it to steal it back from the thief (once in Boston, once in Dallas). God, with me, was right on time.

I hope you can sense those times when God’s timing has seemed just exactly right for you. As you remind yourself of these events, and learn of others who have similar stories in their lives, may that stir you on to keep believing that God is steering your life, that God’s timing in your life is Divinely Orchestrated. Doesn’t that impact how you view tomorrow? It should.

The Apostle Paul has a curious way of describing when God sent Jesus to be born. Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4, “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son...” We interpret this in two ways:

First, in the divine scheme of things, he came at just the right time. The time of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection is the time of completeness - a time when God fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament. This redemption will, of course, be ultimately completed at the second coming of Christ (“that we always need to be ready for,” Jesus said.)

Secondly, we see that God had prepared the world for his birth:

- The Jews had given the world the Old Testament Scriptures (with scores of prophecies regarding the Messiah) which had prepared the way.
- The Greeks had provided a common language that had prepared the way.
- The Romans had given humanity a time of peace, the Pax Romana, which brought organization, order, and stability to the Roman world.

Jesus was born in the reign of Caesar Augustus, the first Emperor in the ancient Roman Empire, the grand-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. It is Augustus who issues the census which causes Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem. Unbeknownst to Augustus, this fulfills Micah’s prophecy made 600 years earlier,

about where the Messiah would be born. Without this order, Joseph and Mary would never have had a reason to leave Nazareth for the birth of their baby.

The peace and order established by Augustus and maintained by his successors helped in the spread of Christianity. The extensive network of Roman roads made travel easier. The Apostle Paul carried his missionary work westward over those roads. It's believed that both Paul and the Apostle Peter were executed in Rome, but not before they had spread the gospel there, causing the message to fan out on Roman roads to the rest of the ancient world.

God was right on time with Christ's first Advent, so we can trust God to be right on time whenever we get to the appointed day of Christ's return. In the meantime, in 2020 or beyond, be ready for it - in both your attitude and actions:

- Keep short accounts with God, don't get behind in your correspondence with him.
- Don't pass up opportunities to do good to those around you.
- Consider how you are building your "spiritual resume" - do your part to grow your faith.
- Be on the lookout for "random encounters" to become "divine appointments."
- Tell the people you love how much they mean to you.
- Don't hoard your generosity.
- And as I get older, I strive to remind myself: "Wag More, Bark Less."

Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.