

The Lord is Coming!

- I. The timing of his coming is unknown
- II. Therefore, we must be ready at all times

³⁶“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹and 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. ⁴⁰Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹Two 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. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Tell me, have you ever had what you might call “unexpected company”? Maybe some out-of-town friends or relatives came knocking on your door without any kind of advance notice. They showed up totally out of the blue. And you welcomed them with open arms. I remember a time when a cousin of mine from Nebraska, who I hadn't seen for years just showed up on my doorstep. Didn't call ahead. Just rang the door and said “Hey, Robbie.” Man, was it good to see him. My girls still talk about the day the Dave Korte came to town (at least in part because of all the stories he had to tell them about their old man).

There may be other times, however, when such unexpected company produces the opposite effect on us. It stresses us out. We feel like we aren't prepared for their arrival. I remember when I was a kid, the pastor and his wife used to kind of unexpectedly drop in on my parents. I don't know how much advance notice they gave us, but I do remember something that came to be known as “the Hoyer drill.” That's when Mom would have us four boys fly around the house, throwing the toys in the closet and the dishes in the dishwasher, all before dear Pastor Hoyer (God bless his soul), walked in the door. That's what happens when people show up unexpectedly. Sometimes it produces joy. Sometimes it produces stress. It all depends on who they are and how prepared we are to meet them.

Today we enter the season of the church year known as Advent, a time when Christians look forward to the celebration of Jesus' first coming, as the babe of Bethlehem, but also to the reality of his second coming as the Judge of all mankind. It's that second coming that our text for today turns our attention to today. Here God's Word makes it clear that:

The Lord is Coming!

- I. The Timing of his coming is unknown
- (and therefore) II. We must be ready at all times

This portion of Matthew's gospel is a part of a larger discourse that Jesus had with his disciples in the days leading up to his crucifixion. As Jesus is walking past the massive Temple complex in Jerusalem, he tells his disciples that the day will come when the temple will be totally destroyed. The disciples' response? “Jesus, when will this happen?” Actually they ask a

two-part question. *“When will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3)*

Jesus answers the second half of their question first. He points them to things like wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, false prophets and persecution. He says that these are all signs which will precede his second coming. When you and I see these signs in the world around us, they should tell us that the Lord can return at any time.

But when it comes to exact time of his return, what does Jesus say here in our text? *“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven or the Son, but only the Father.* Now, someone might read those words and say, *“Wait a minute. How can Jesus say that he doesn’t know when the end will come? Isn’t Jesus God? Doesn’t God know everything?”* Yes, that’s true. But remember, Jesus spoke these words during his state of humiliation, during that time, when, as true Man, he had set aside the full use of his divine power and glory and knowledge. At that moment, Jesus could truthfully say, *“I don’t know when the end the age will be.”* Jesus could say exactly what you and I can say, namely, *“I know it’s coming. I just don’t know when.”*

In fact, you know what that reminds me of? It reminds me of the “strepitus”. Do you know what the strepitus is? It’s that loud noise you hear at the very end of the Tenebrae service on Good Friday. It represents the sound of the stone rolling against the tomb. If you’ve ever been to a Tenebrae services, you know it’s coming. You’re sure it’s coming. You just don’t know exactly when. So it is with Jesus’ return. You can know he’s coming. But you can’t know when.

And yet, even though Jesus clearly says that no one can know the day of his return, still, down through the centuries, people have tried to set a date for Jesus’ return. The church father Hippolytus predicted that Jesus would return in 500 AD. One of Luther's contemporaries was even more specific. Michael Stifel predicted that Jesus would return on October 19th 1533, at exactly 8 am. In the 1800s and 1900s the Jehovah's Witnesses have repeatedly set the date of Jesus’ return. When Jesus didn't show up on the day they predicted, they simply changed the date. Early in my ministry, I received in the mail a book entitled 88 Reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1988. I wonder why that book is no longer in print. It's just another in a long line of failed attempts to predict the day of Jesus’ return. Jesus says that no one can know when he will return.

But, here in our text, Jesus also says that because no one can know the exact day of his return, there will be a whole lot of people who are caught totally off guard when he does return. In that sense, it will be a lot like what happened at the time of the Flood. How does Jesus put it? *“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 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; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.” (Matthew 24:37-39)*

Do you see the point that Jesus is making? Jesus is not emphasizing how wicked the people in Noah's day were, although that certainly true. That's why God sent the flood in the first place. No, the point that Jesus is making is this: In spite of all the warnings that God gave the people (I mean, God had Noah preach for a hundred and twenty years before he sent the flood.) In spite of the major sign that God gave them (What was this massive ark built on dry ground except a sign from God?) Yet, still, the people were absolutely oblivious to what was coming. They were completely preoccupied with their earthly lives, eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage. So that, when the end finally came, they were totally blindsided by it.

They were suddenly swept away by something that, for them, was totally unexpected.

Well, Jesus draws the parallel to his return at the end of time. He says, *“That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.”* In other words, when Jesus returns in glory, with all his angels, there will be a whole lot of people who will be totally caught off guard, people who are absolutely unprepared. It will happen so suddenly that, as Jesus says, *“Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.”*

Now, don't misunderstand those words. Sometimes people try to use those words to prove that in the Rapture, Jesus is going to take some people to heaven and leave everyone else down here on earth. They will be the ones who are “Left Behind.” But that's not consistent with scripture. When Jesus returns in glory, there are only two options. People either go to heaven or they go to hell. No one is remaining here on earth.

Jesus' point here is that the timing of that event, I. the timing of his final return, is something that, for humans, is unknown. Now, the question is, what impact does that fact have on our lives today? Well, Jesus tells us. Because the timing of Jesus' coming is unknown; II. Therefore we must be ready at all times.

Notice what Jesus says. *“Therefore, (in other words, in light of what happened to the people in Noah's day) keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”* Jesus uses the illustration of a thief in the night. If a homeowner knew exactly when the thief was going to break in, he'd make sure he was guarding the house at that very moment. He could take a nap the rest of the time. But because the homeowner doesn't know when the thief will come, so he needs to be on guard and alert at all times. So it is with you and me and Jesus' return. Because we don't know when Jesus is coming, we must be ready at all times. How does Jesus put it? *“So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”*

So in real terms, what does that mean “to be ready for the Lord's return”? Is it even possible to be ready for something that's going to happen when you don't expect it? Isn't that like a contradiction in terms? No, it isn't a contradiction. You can be ready for Jesus' unexpected return, by keeping in mind three key truths. Truth #1. Just because Jesus hasn't come yet, doesn't mean he's not coming at all. You realize, there are a lot of people in the world who believe that there will never be a Judgment Day. In fact, the Bible talks about those people with these words: *In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” (2 Peter 3:3-4)* My friends, don't get caught in that crowd. Being ready for Jesus' return starts with knowing that he is coming back, even if for the moment, he's still delaying his return. How did St. Peter put it? *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. (Rather) He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)* The only reason Jesus hasn't come back yet is he wants to allow a few more people come to know and believe in him.

Truth #2: Being ready for the Lord's coming means being careful how you use the time between now and then. The Bible is filled with warnings about falling asleep on the job, spiritually speaking. Saying, “Lord, don't worry about me. I'll be just fine. I'll just use my time to do what I want to do (yawn).” Did you hear what St. Paul had to say to you and me in our epistle reading today? *The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Romans 13: 11-12).*

What's Paul talking about there? He's talking about using the time God has given us, not as a chance to indulge our sinful nature, not as a time to see what we can get away with before Jesus shows up, but rather as a time to put away the deeds of darkness, that is, to confess the sins we've committed against God, both the ones that other people see us committing, and the ones that nobody knows about.

And then, and here's the most important truth of all (Truth #3). Being ready for the Lord's return means bringing all those sins to Jesus, and believing that he's paid for all of them in full. Believe him when he says through the prophet Isaiah, "*I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist.*" (Isaiah 44:22). Or in the words of King David, *As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us.* (Psalm 103:12) Believe what God tells you through the Apostle Paul, *Therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1) Believe St John when he writes, *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* (1 John 3:8)

My friends, isn't that what faith is? It's believing God's promises. And that what makes you ready for the Lord's return. Being ready for the second coming of Christ doesn't mean sitting in church 24/7. It doesn't mean hoping and praying that when Jesus comes, he won't catch you doing something really bad. No, being ready for Jesus means acknowledging that, by nature, all you are is bad. More importantly, it means believing that by his blood and righteousness, Jesus has made you completely good. He's has made you right with God.

In that sense, the only thing you need to be ready to meet Jesus is...Jesus. And you have him, right here in this Word. He gives himself to you, right here in his body and blood. You realize what that means? It means that by faith in Jesus, you're ready to meet the Lord, right now, face to face. Whether you meet Jesus by way of a fatal car accident on your way home today, or you meet him in a hospital room, at the end of a long battle with cancer, or you meet him when the trumpet sounds and Jesus returns in glory for all to see. In the end, being prepared for Jesus' return means simply saying, "Jesus, I don't know when you're coming. But when you do, I'll be ready. Not because of anything I've done, but because everything you've done for me. Jesus, when you're ready, I'm ready." In fact, you might say, "Jesus, on the basis of the promises you've made to me, I will be expecting you." God keep us all to the final, glorious day. Amen.