

No One Knows

Matthew 24:36-44

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

The lectionary on this, the first Sunday of Advent, directs our attention to what biblical scholars often refer to as the Olivet Discourse, where Jesus offers his thoughts on events to come. “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,” Jesus begins. Then he compares this time to come, the return of Jesus, to Noah’s flood. “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, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Due in no small measure to these prophetic passages, many people throughout history have been fixated on the end of the world. A couple of weeks ago, I talked about the Millerites, followers of William Miller, from Low Hampton, New York, who declared that Jesus would return to earth sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. His followers prepared for the end of the world by selling or giving away their possessions; many gathered in cemeteries wearing white muslin robes to await their translation into heaven. When Jesus failed to appear at the appointed hour, Miller returned to his calculations and set a new date: October 22, 1844.

But Jesus clearly says here in today's Gospel that such predictions miss the point. No one knows, he says. Not William Miller. Not Jesus himself. The purpose of these prophetic passages is not to set dates or in some way try to game the system. The purpose instead is to live our lives in preparation, in such a way that we are ready at any time for the return of Christ.

The preachers of my childhood regularly invoked the end of the world as a goad to repentance. Make sure you're ready for the return of Christ, they warned, lest you be left behind. The backdrop for these sermons was the specter of judgment, so they expended a great deal of energy depicting the torments of hell and asking whether and when I had been saved.

Only years later would I learn the appropriate response to that question, When was I saved? Oh, about two thousand years ago – when Jesus came to earth for the first time.

And that is what we celebrate during this season of Advent: the coming of the Christ child, the one who brings hope, not judgment. Redemption, not condemnation.

But even as we celebrate the first advent, we look forward with hope to the second advent of Christ. I expect that Jesus' words in the Olivet Discourse held special resonance with the Christians of the first century. They were persecuted, after all, and the promise of the return of Christ held the

promise of deliverance from their sufferings, the promise that justice would be done, that evil would one day be vanquished.

But Jesus is always careful to warn against setting a date. We don't know when that day will come, he says, so we should live our lives accordingly.

In Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, the central character, Jack Gladney, regularly announces that he is "scheduled to die" in a few weeks or a few days. I suppose there might be a strange comfort in that knowledge. It would provide the time and the opportunity, not to mention the motivation, to put all of your affairs in order.

But Jesus says that, even though we don't know the time or the hour, we should live our lives in such a way that we are prepared for the end of time – or for the end of our own time here on earth. Rather than guess the date, we should keep our affairs in order because no one knows when the end of time will arrive.

For me, today's Gospel serves as a reminder that I should live every day as if it were my last. Not wait to set my affairs aright – dealing with unconfessed sins, for instance, or mending a broken relationship – until a later day. Not put off the things I want to do with loved ones. Not wait until later to make amends and clear my conscience.

It also means that I should not put off much longer the things I want to do in this life. The scriptures remind us that we are allotted threescore and ten years, give or take – some of us more, and some less – and we should seize the moment. It means that I cannot delay for many more years that marathon I want to run or that coast-to-coast bicycle trip that I've been thinking about for a very long time now. It means that if I ever want to travel the inside passage of southeastern Alaska or hear the King's College choir on Christmas Eve I should keep the phone number of a travel agent within easy reach.

Threescore and ten, give or take.

No one knows the day or the hour, Jesus tells us. Unlike Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, we don't know when we are scheduled to die. But in this season of Advent, when we observe the coming of Jesus, he reminds us to be prepared as well for the second advent.

Both the first Advent and the second coming are occasions for great celebration. Jesus did not come in judgment to the manger in Bethlehem; he came to live among us, to share our humanity – our sorrows, our joy. So too we should look forward to his return with great anticipation and readiness, our accounts settled, our relationships mended, our affairs in order.

Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus!

First Sunday of Advent

November 28, 2010

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut