

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 24:36-44 (NRSV)

"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.

Romans 13:11-14 (NRSV)

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; [12] the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; [13] let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. [14] Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

CHICAGO AND ECCLESIASTES

“Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care? We all have time enough to die.” That’s theology from the rock band Chicago. No wonder so many people suggest that my generation is unmotivated and pessimistic. A philosophy like that can lead to despair.

And yet that philosophy is not original with Chicago. In fact we can find something that sounds a lot like that pessimistic Chicago lyric in the Old Testament. In the book of Ecclesiastes the preacher wrote,

“There’s nothing new under the sun. People are born, they grow up, they go to work, and then they die. The sun rises and the sun sets, and the next day it does it all over again. There’s nothing new under the sun.” Life can become a grinding wheel without an end or a beginning. It is just one thing after another.

Many people think that’s true. We might change the words a bit and put them to music, but basically the message is the same. New and improved is always a false promise.

Every year we see the same old tired holiday specials on TV. They drag out the tinsel earlier every year. But, it seems to have lost its glitter. It seems crazy to start the Christmas season during Halloween, but that’s what we’ve come to in this country. Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anyone really care?

Several weeks ago I spent some time where we really didn’t know what time it was and we really didn’t care. On the good ship, Sovereign of the Seas, we wouldn’t even know what day it was if they didn’t conveniently change the mat in the elevator.

I guess that’s the attraction of such a vacation. Some would say that we’re too tied to the clock. We don’t appreciate the time that we have because we’re so busy going here and there and doing this and that.

What we need is some time away in the Caribbean sun with our watch and cell phone securely packed away. Who cares what time it is? Why not create some time for yourself.

Our lesson from Matthew tells us that we really don’t know what time it is. In that regard Chicago had it right. In fact we learn that it is impossible for us to know what time it is. In Matthew 24:36 we read that when it comes to the really important time, that time when Christ comes again in glory, “no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” There are many who would like to know, and there are many who claim to know, but the Scripture is clear on that point.

Chicago had it right. No one really knows what time it is.

DOES ANYBODY REALLY CARE?

But, what about that second line to their song. “Does anybody really care?”
What about you? Do you care what time it is?

The first coming of Christ is shrouded in the ancient mists of time and layers of tradition. The second coming of Christ is an event long delayed. Should we really care about such things? The second coming seems to be the province of the religious crackpot or the TV evangelist who is trying to whip up some frenzy among his followers in connection with some financial campaign.

We in the mainline churches have often decided that we shouldn't care about eschatology. After all if we don't know about the future, why worry about it? When the time comes, our time will come, but until then, let's just eat, drink and be merry.

I found out on my cruise that some people do just that. One wealthy lady took a cruise and enjoyed it so much she decided to book that cruise for the rest of her life. She just lives on the ship in a fancy stateroom. She has decided to spend the rest of her days thinking about nothing but what she wants to order for dinner.

As much as I like to get away from it all, the thought of being “permanently” on vacation on a cruise ship does not appeal to me. It's the not caring and being so disconnected from others that seems so selfish and also sad.

A CALL TO WATCH AND WAIT

According to our lessons for today, the fact that we don't know what time it is doesn't mean that we shouldn't care. On the contrary, it should mean that we should care more than ever.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that salvation is nearer to us than we might imagine. And the response to that approaching salvation is not a lackadaisical attitude but a sense of alert.

Advent is the church's four week answer to those who would make the Christmas season into one long orgy of shopping and overindulgence and not caring. Instead of a season of not caring, Advent is a time to be alert. Advent is a time to be on watch. Advent is a time to get ready precisely because we don't know what time it is.

We should live our lives in a state of anticipation and excitement instead of a self-indulgent stupor. The message of Advent is that we should live our life on tiptoe.

NOAH

And the example Jesus uses is the example of Noah.

You'll remember that Noah knew that a time of crisis was coming. God told him that it was time to prepare. And in response to God's warning Noah began to build an ark, a really big ark.

According to the Bible, there was considerable lag time between God's warning and the actual judgment day. Noah didn't finish his project in a few weekends. It wasn't like adding a deck on his porch. No, Noah was 480 years old when he started the project, and he was 600 years old when the project was finally finished.

Can you imagine how foolish Noah must have looked to his neighbors?

There was a man in our neighborhood in West Virginia who decided to build his own house. He finally completed the house, but it took over twenty years! Every time we passed by that house we all joked about this inept carpenter who insisted on building his own house. He was the laughingstock of the neighborhood.

Imagine how it must have been for Noah. You can live in a house, but who builds a gargantuan ship so far from the coast? And yet Noah believed that God had truly spoken to him. Noah lived his life on tiptoe for 120 years.

Now, you might wonder why God didn't tell Noah exactly how long he had to complete the project. Maybe God knew that we human beings are natural procrastinators.

When I was in college and had a big test, guess when I did most of my studying? That's right, the night before the test. If Noah had known when the great deluge would occur, perhaps he would have just put it off until the 119th year, and then it would have been too late.

Maybe that's why God doesn't give us a timeline for our life. Maybe that's why God doesn't let us know what time it is. Uncertainty can be a blessing. Uncertainty can motivate us to keep working and striving. We wait for the coming of God, but we are motivated by the fact that we don't know exactly when that coming will occur.

THE CHURCH OF ANTICIPATION

I am more excited by the Christmas season now than ever before but not because I have grown to love the commercialism and tinsel of the season. On the contrary, I have come to despise them more with each passing year.

But, as the years have passed I have learned the joy of waiting for God's time. As the years have passed I have come to understand and believe more than anything else that the salvation of God is being worked out in ways that are above and beyond us.

In the church we are in the business of building an ark. We are in the business of preparing for God's future. In a world that doesn't know what time it is and doesn't really care, we are a community that cares very deeply because we believe that we live on the edge of eternity.

Like Noah's neighbors many will laugh at our crazy construction project. How can prayer be the answer in world bent on destruction? Surely we need to do something more proactive to prevent the spread of evil.

How can we preach a naive philosophy like doing good to those who harm you? What kind of idiot loves his enemies? How can we possibly believe

that a silent, holy night is possible in this world filled with evil men like Herod and Hitler and Sadaam?

Our neighbors think that the church is a time capsule filled with foolish or even demented dreamers. It's been a long time since Jesus was here. How can we wait for him so expectantly after all those years? The sun goes up and the sun goes down just like it has done for thousands of years. We just need to enjoy our time in the sun and forget about tomorrow.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Jesus said that this was exactly what they were doing in Noah's day. They were eating and drinking. They were marrying and giving in marriage. And then one day Noah and his crew stepped into the ark, the door slammed shut, and the Day of Judgment came crashing down on the people.

Those of us who have experienced momentous event are often taken aback by how normal things seemed the day before the big event. I remember playing golf with my music director, Mark Anderson a couple days before a hurricane pounded Central Florida. We knew the storm was coming. We knew what that could mean because we had already experienced several storms that year.

But, it was such a pleasant day to play golf. The sun was shining and the birds were singing. And yet we knew that soon the storm would come. After our round of golf we would have to go home and get ready.

Fortunately, we now have advanced warning when it comes to hurricanes. But, there are many more storms in life that do not provide advance warning. They come (as Jesus put it) like a "thief in the night."

Who would have thought that a 23 year old professional athlete, a defensive back for the Washington Redskins would have his life snuffed out by a botched robbery attempt? It's not supposed to happen that way. This young man had his whole life ahead of him. But, the day of reckoning came sooner rather than later.

Those of us who have lost loved ones in a tragic way are often impressed by how normal things seemed before the big event. And yet in an instant our world changed completely. We weren't ready. In some ways it was impossible to be ready. Who can predict the great tragedies of our life? None of us really know what time it is.

PREPARE NOW

But, today's text tells us that there is a way to prepare ... even though we do not know what time it is. We learn the lesson of Noah and the thief in the night and begin our preparation for the coming of God's Kingdom here and now.

We do not put off saying "I love you" to those that we love. We do not put off that act of kindness or that opportunity to help that person in need. Every moment is precious, and every situation is an opportunity to invite someone into the ark of salvation, the ark of salvation that God always provides for his people when the storm is coming.

Quite often events overtake us. We feel out of control. We feel helpless and sometimes hopeless. Our Lord's message for today is simple. Prepare for the unexpected; prepare by living faithfully today. And when disaster strikes, you will have what it takes to survive.

One preacher described the Christmas season as a season of "slurpy sentimentality." Slurpy is not a word, but I like that phrase. It gets at the problem with the Christmas season.

And that's why we have Advent. As the world rushes to play terrible renditions of the Christmas carols on tinny speakers and as the world rushes to fill the calendar with parties that feature eating and drinking galore, the church starts the season on a more somber and challenging note.

We begin the season with a reminder that it is always later than we think. We begin the season with a reminder that salvation does not begin with what we can do and say. We have no control over the future. We really don't know what time it is.

And so we start the new church year with these jarring apocalyptic texts. We start the new church year with an urgent appeal, “Don’t be flat footed in your approach to life brothers and sisters. You need to be alert. You need to get up on tip toe and strain to see the heavenly light that can lead us to safety.”

I like the way preacher Tom Long described Advent. He said that “if the dam twenty minutes upstream breaks, then the Rembrandt on the wall suddenly becomes less valuable than the rubber raft in the attic.” Knowing the dangers that lie ahead can make an impact on what we value today.

Suppose we did know what time it is? Suppose we knew as a matter of fact that the world would end tomorrow and we would face the one that we call Judge?

How would that affect our decisions in life? How would we change the way we treat others? How would that change our sense of compassion? How might that change our political views? How would that change our view of justice?

Who might we accept that now we reject? Might we dare to love an enemy? Might we have the courage to practice peacemaking with our lives instead of just talking about it with our lips?

I’m your pastor, but I don’t really know what time it is. I don’t know if it’s late or early in God’s scheme of things, and neither do you.

It’s not just about when we’ll face our own mortality. It’s not just about us having time enough to die (as Chicago puts it). It’s more important than that. It’s about aligning ourselves with the Savior who comes. It’s about constructing an ark of salvation instead of frittering our time away on things that are not important.

HOW WE WAIT

How we wait depends a lot on for whom we wait. We can wait with a bit of anxiety as when we wait for some test results at the doctor’s office. We can wait with boredom as we join the crowd at the auto repair shop. But, if we

are waiting for one we love, then there is a sense of anticipation and excitement.

When Carrollyn and I were newlyweds, during the week I worked at the mental health center in West Virginia while she stayed at the dorm and finished her college education in Virginia.

I still remember waiting for her return each week, and I would prepare for her return. On Wednesday I would buy groceries and plan the meals. On Thursday I would clean the house and get it ready. And on Friday, though she hadn't made it home quite yet, it was as if she had already made it back. My spirits and hopes were high because now the one for whom I had waited would soon be back home.

Do you see how it makes a difference? If you're waiting for one you love, and if you have a sure hope for that reunion, then it is almost as if that event has already occurred.

This is how we should think about the season of Advent. The call to watch and wait is not only a word of warning but also a word of hope. For those who have the faith to look expectantly for a Savior tomorrow, today is transformed by that expectation.

No one knows what time it is. But, those who have hope for the future are given the capacity to really care and really forgive because sin and death have been defeated by our great Savior.

KNOWLEDGE WE DON'T NEED

Anna Carter Florence, a professor at Columbia Seminary told a story about a friend, a Protestant Clergyman who lives in Budapest.

She said that since the fall of Communism, it is now possible for each Hungarian citizen to go to the government and request his or her "file," to read the reports and denunciations it contains.

But, her friend refused to retrieve his file. He said, "What would I learn? That a colleague, perhaps, denounced me? That a friend betrayed me? What

would I do with that knowledge? Would it make a difference in how I live? No, I do not want that knowledge. I leave it to God.”

And in the same way God keeps some knowledge about the future from us. It would not help us. In fact we could not bear such knowledge.

The Bible tells us that from the very beginning man and women have been unwilling to wait for God. That was the sin of Adam and Eve. They wanted to know what time it was. They wanted to know what only God could know. They wanted to be like God.

But, that knowledge did not bring them hope. It brought estrangement, from God and from each other. Sin came into the world when the man and the woman decided that they could decide for themselves what time it was. And after a while, they didn't care. Only by the grace of God did hope come back to the world in His Son, Jesus.

There is some knowledge that we should not want. God in God's great mercy has spared us the knowledge of the date and the time. Instead he invites us to savor every moment of our lives as the indescribable gift that it really is.

Does anybody really know what time it is? Only God and He's not telling. Does anybody really care? In Christ we learn that God cares and because of that we have hope ... not only for this life but also for the life to come. So, wake up brothers and sisters. We need to get ready. Once again the season of Advent is upon us.

Amen.