**Advent: *The Season of* *Joy***

**Sunday December 1, 2019**

**Advent 1: “Watching and Waiting” (Matthew 24:36-44)**

**1. Introduction: *88 Reasons***

In the summer that I got married, I was a student minister at a two-point charge, Woodford Baptist Church, Woodford and First Baptist Church, Meaford. It was a great learning experience for me as I was involved in many aspects of pastoral ministry: youth group, VBS, visitation, Bible studies, prayer meetings, morning worship and preaching. In August, the minister went on holidays, so I was left to handle things on my own. One of the routine tasks that I would do every day was walk down to the post office and get the church’s mail. I didn’t mind this little chore because it got me out of the office and into the neighborhood for a morning walk. Typically, the mail consisted of bills, cards, letters or junk mail, but one day in the mailbox there was a very strange pamphlet that caught my attention. In bold letters on its front cover it declared**, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988****.* Now this made me a bit nervous because I was really looking forward to getting married and I had a lot of living that I wanted to do before the Lord’s return. For those who are unfamiliar with the term *rapture,* it is the word that is used to describe Christ’s act of gathering up Christians, both living and dead, when he returns at the end of the age (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). So, the writer of this pamphlet was arguing that Jesus would return in 1988, sometime between September 11 and September 13.

Admittedly, I was quite skeptical of this writer’s claims and his use of Scripture. As it turned out, his predictions were wrong - Jesus didn’t return in September 1988 and I’m still happily married these many years later. But this was not an isolated incident of a failed prediction of Jesus’ second coming, history is littered with many examples of failed forecasts of Christ’s return. It makes me wonder if people are really paying attention to Jesus’ words as recorded here in Matthew 24:36, “*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*.” Jesus, of course, was taking about his glorious second coming at the end of the age (Matthew 24:27-31). His words should be a sobering reminder to everyone of the futility of constructing an elaborate timetable for the end of the world or predicting the exact date of Jesus’ return. Nevertheless, people either sidestep or explain away this verse. For instance, the writer of the *88 Reasons* booklet remarked, “this does not preclude or prevent the faithful from knowing the year, the month, and the week of the Lord's return.” Talk about your exegetical gymnastics!

**2. The Three Advents**

Now, I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’m talking about the second coming of Jesus on the first Sunday of Advent. You came to church this morning expecting to hear about Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, the magi and baby Jesus in the manger. But instead you heard these words that Jesus spoke during the last week of his earthly life when he was telling his disciples about the end of the world. When you heard this morning’s Gospel lesson, you likely thought that it was a rather strange passage for Advent. But the good news is that you are in the company many Christians around the world who follow the cycle of Bible readings set out in the Revised Common Lectionary. The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of Bible readings used by various Protestant churches. In Canada, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Lutherans, the United Church and some Baptists follow the Revised Common Lectionary. The beauty of the Revised Common Lectionary is that it forces preachers to preach on passages that they would otherwise avoid.

But beyond its presence in the lectionary readings for this Sunday, there is another, more important reason for reflecting on Matthew 24 at the beginning of Advent. Typically, Advent is viewed primarily in relation to the birth of Jesus. But it means so much more! *Advent* comes from the Latin word that means *“coming.”* But Advent is not only about the first coming of Jesus in Bethlehem. It is about his *three comings*.

Each of the three comings of Advent is very different. Jesus’ first coming is the story of that first Christmas, filled with angelic proclamations, long journeys, shepherds, magi, Joseph, Mary and the baby in the manger. The gospel accounts, found in Matthew and Luke, give us the important details of this wonderful event, but John’s Gospel nicely summarizes its significance – “The Word became *flesh* and lived among us” (John 1:14). The message of Christmas stresses God’s love for humanity; a love so great that he himself became one of us in order to serve, to reveal, to teach, and to offer his life as a sacrifice.

While Jesus’ first coming was visible, his intermediate advent is hiddenand invisible*.* This is the presence of Christ by the Spirit in our lives, strengthening, renewing, comforting and guiding us. The risen Christ also stands among us, present to us through the voice of Scripture, when we celebrate Communion and as we are joined together in one body, the Body of Christ. “This coming makes Jesus present in our own lives, eternally enlivening, eternally with us” (Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year,* p. 65). This advent reflects Jesus’ final words to his disciples in Matthew 28:20, “And remember*, I am with you always*, to the end of the age.”

The final advent of Christ is his return to earth in glory and majesty at the end of the age. This is often called the Second Coming of Christ. This advent will result in the consummation of God’s kingdom rule on earth. It is this coming that Christians eagerly await since it will mark the end of evil and suffering in our world and fully usher in God’s kingdom rule. The Book of Revelation offers us a beautiful image of this wonderful event – “I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, *God’s home is now among his people*! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and *there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain*. All these things are gone forever.’And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, *I am making everything new*!” (Revelation 21:3-5). We long for this day with all our being. We eagerly await the reign of God to come in all its fullness. So, with all God’s people, we declare, “Amen, Come Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

In his famous Advent sermon, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) nicely summarized these three advents of our Lord, “In his first coming our Lord came in our flesh and in our weakness; in this middle coming he comes in spirit and in power; in the final coming he will be seen in glory and majesty” (<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/three-comings-of-the-lord-st-bernard>).

**3. Challenge: Watching and Waiting**

The thing that I find most curious about these end time passages in the New Testament is their use in whipping people into an apocalyptic frenzy. Throughout time preachers have used these biblical passages to sow fear, anxiety, alarm, and terror in the hearts of people. But a consideration of the wider context of Matthew 24 soon reveals that this was not the original intent of this passage.

This morning’s Gospel lesson is part of a larger section where Jesus predicted the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and warned his disciples of the troubles and dangers that they would soon face (Matthew 24:4-25)*.* Shortly after Jesus predicted the Temple’s destruction (Matthew 24:2), his disciples asked him, “*When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the ages*?” (Matthew 24:3). In response to his disciples’ inquiry, Jesus did not give a specific date or a timetable of events for the end of the ages. Instead, he offered numerous exhortations to resist *deception* and *fear* in the face of events that *seem* to mark the end of the world. Religious charlatans will come, saying, “*I am the Messiah*,” but don’t be deceived by them (Matthew 24:4). Wars will be fought and world leaders will rattle their sabres, but don’t be alarmed*. “Such things must happen, but the end is still to come”* (Matthew 24:6). Kingdoms will be in conflict and disasters will strike, but this is only the *beginning* (Matthew 24:7). The disciples will be arrested, persecuted and put to death(Matthew 24:9). In the face of earth-shattering events, Jesus encourages his followers to not be deceived or alarmed, even though it may appear to be the end of the world. Instead, he urges us to stand firm to the very end*.* These passages, then, were never intended to induce fear or to stir up end-time fervour.

Jesus did predict his return “with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30-31), yet he did not give a specific date for this event. Instead, he noted that no one, with exception of the Father, knows the day or the hour of his final advent (Matthew 24:36). In view of the unexpected character of Christ’s return, his followers are urged to “*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming*” (Matthew 24:42). Just like a homeowner watching out for a burglar, the Christian is to be “*Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up*” (Matthew 24:44).

Two millennia later, we’re still watching and waiting. This quote nicely expresses what this waiting entails:

“But this waiting is not a passive waiting. It is an active waiting. As any expectant mother knows, this waiting also involves preparation, exercise, nutrition, care, prayer, work; and birth involves pain, blood, tears, joy, release, and community. It is called labour for a reason. Likewise, we are in a world pregnant with hope, and we live in the expectation of the coming of God’s kingdom on earth. As we wait, we also work, cry, pray, ache; we are midwives of another world” (*Common Prayer,* p. 50).

I love that phrase “*midwives of another world*.” We are involved in the birthing of something new. While we wait, we are actively involved in God’s mission. In the parables that follow this passage, Jesus let’s us know what it means to be alert and be prepared for his return. It means that we are faithful and wise servants who care for others, rather than becoming abusive or self-indulgent while the Master tarries (Matthew 24:45-51). It means that we faithfully use the gifts and resources that the Master has given us, rather than burying them in the ground because we’re afraid. (Matthew 25:14-30). It means that we compassionately minister to the marginalized and the forgotten in our world, treating them like we would Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46). In this in-between time, we are called to be God’s faithful servants in the world.

As midwives of another world, Jesus challenges us to help birth the kingdom, to continue with the tasks that he has given us in his kingdom work in anticipation of its the culmination when he returns. Being ready for the Lord’s return does not mean that we gaze at the heavens looking for signs, rather, it entails a dedication to the work that he has given us. The work of the kingdom continues on in spite of the darkness that threatens it. We are called to shine Christ’s light into the world. God is using us to make the world a *better* place, yet we realize that only he can make it a *perfect* place.

**4. Conclusion: Having Hope**

The promise of our Lord’s return fills us with hope. Yet not a superficial hope that convinces us to put on a happy face and ignore the brokenness all around us. It is a hope that is knee-deep in reality. The daily news overwhelms us with the evil and injustice in our world. Every day humans find new and awful ways to injure, mistreat, and oppress their brothers and sisters. With every fibre of our being, we cry out for the wrongs to be made right. Sickness, pain, mental illness, suffering and death surround us, touching our lives and the lives of the people that we care about. Into these difficult situations we pray for healing, wholeness and peace. All of us here carry heavy burdens, experience brokenness, and struggle with sin. We long to be made whole and to experience God’s presence in a profound way. In a world filled with hunger, war, injustice, oppression, brokenness, pain and death, it’s easy to give in to despair at this cycle of sorrow. Will things go on as they always have? Will things ever change?

New Testament scholar, Dale Allison has written an interesting book on Jesus, but most of us would disagree with his final conclusions. Yet I found the epilogue of his book extremely moving. He writes, “And yet, despite everything, for those who have ears to hear, Jesus says the only things worth saying, for his dream is the only one worth dreaming. If our wounds never heal, if the outrageous spectacle of history filled with cataclysmic sadness is never undone, if there is nothing more for those who were slaughtered in the death camps or for six-year olds devoured by cancer, then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. If in the end there is no good God to calm the sea of troubles, to raise the dead, and to give good news to the poor, then this is indeed a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing” (*Jesus of Nazareth,* p. 219).

One day, Jesus will say the only word worth saying. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 we read these words, “*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God*.” What Jesus will shout when he returns? Some have suggested that he will shout ***ENOUGH!***Enough suffering. Enough starvation. Enough terror. Enough death. Enough injustice. Enough despair and hopelessness. Enough brokenness and sickness. Enough! This is the hope that we have, that one day Jesus will return and shout *enough.*