

Sermon Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44, MSG

36 “But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows.

37-39 “The Arrival of the Son of Man will take place in times like Noah’s. Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing—until the flood hit and swept everything away.

39-44 “The Son of Man’s Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind. So stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up.

Sermon

Friends, I cannot believe that we are here celebrating **Advent I**. On the First Sunday in Advent, the church begins its new year celebration by focusing on the End, with a capital E with the expectation of Jesus finally coming to us. I mean, for us, it has been almost two-thousand years. The lectionary for today is extremely challenging and it does not seem like the scripture that we heard would be what we would want to hear as we head into the Christmas season; right?

This morning, is one of those weeks where I want us to expand our text. The nine verses that we read today simply do not give us enough of the context. Every liturgical year, we dive into an eschatological discourse during the first week of Advent. The conversation that we hear today comes immediately following Jesus predicting that the temple will be destroyed. If you remember, we had the temple text from Luke just a few weeks ago. The Gospel of Matthew takes a different angle.

In Matthew’s Gospel when Jesus is asked about the temple being destroyed, he jumps to the end. He talks about the end of the cosmos and the end of history, as we know it. Now, let me share with you that this difficult text is his prelude to what is coming next. Following the nine verses that read, Jesus **shares four eschatological parables** that expand over fifty-verses. If you want to read them, you can pick them up in chapter twenty-four, verse forty-five and they carry on through chapter twenty-five, verse forty-six. The parables that he covers are the following:

- The story of the faithful servant
- The story of the virgins
- The story about investments
- The story about the Sheep and Goats

When we take a look at the words of Jesus and examine the Gospel of Matthew, I think that we can be challenged. I know that when I first peeled back the language of Matthew, I was a little shocked and it changed my thought process on the end times and what Matthew was trying to accomplish. Thus, let’s dive into the text and maybe, I will be taking an angle that you have not heard and seen before. If that is the case, I ask you to keep your mind open and be challenged and see if it makes a difference on how we live while we wait.

Most likely the Gospel of Matthew was written in the 80’s. Thus, fifty years had passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now, there is no doubt that Matthew wanted to reassert the end of times expectations because it has been a lifetime plus of time. However, let me be clear, there was a deeper concern and I believe that this deeper concern has a direct impact on how we should be living out our lives here in Door County in 2022. So, what was this concern? He wanted them the lives of those in church so they practiced a end of time existence in the present.

This can be very difficult to comprehend and to wrap our head around this concept may stretch us. When Cheryl sent me the bulletin to preview, I asked her if the photo that she had on the cover was her choosing or the suggestion photo from Sunday and Seasons, our liturgy resource book that we use. She mentioned that it was from our resources. At first, I was surprised that our lectionary folks pulled out the Noah imagery. But, then when I thought of it through the eyes of Matthew, it made perfect sense.

Matthew compares the end of times **with the flood**.

In the 1990's, the "Left Behind" series took off and individuals were literally devouring them in parts of the U.S. Much of the theology in the book was based off the passage that we read today when we read "*one will be left and one will be taken.*" In the Left Behind series and the rapture theology states that when the rapture occurs, Jesus will take the faithful and the unfaithful will be left behind.

However, if we look at the full narrative of Matthew, we may see that Matthew does a complete reversal of this and we might be shocked at what happens if we look at the text through a new lens.

If you have been reading or listening to the daily readings, we have been hearing the story of Noah for the Old Testament. As a reminder, Year A's daily reading schedule is out in the Gathering space, which you can take home and it is on the churches Facebook and YouTube page. It is a great way for us to **study, which is one of our faith practices** in the ELCA.

Now, back to Noah and today's passage of Matthew and how we can look at this through a new lens. **The Great Flood took away the unfaithful and left behind the faithful.** Thus, with those seeds planted, hear the scripture again:

Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing—until the flood hit and swept everything away. The Son of Man's Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind.

On Tuesday, I went down to Green Bay and met up with four of my colleagues and I threw this scenario out to them. One of them, in a sarcastic voice, said "yea, more work for us to do." His sarcasm may be the hard truth.

In the four parables that come after the reading, Jesus compares the sheep and the goats. You remember the story right. Jesus compares those who do and do not feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked. Those left behind, inherit the reign of God where there is more work to be done. This is definitely a different take than what most hear when they listen into the discussions about the end times.

Back to my colleague and more work. I am sure that when you heard those words, a deep sigh took place. More work, that is the last thing that I need. Come on now, PJ, you have been talking about us being overwhelmed and now you are throwing out there that are reward is more work?

I ask you to take a deep breath and hear this message.

This extra work, in the eyes of Matthew, is a gift from God. It is absolutely amazing to think that we have been transformed by the life of Christ and his death and resurrection. Thus, we have received an invitation to participate in the transformation of world that is still in process.

Each week, we come into this holy space and we have the opportunity to partake in the sacrament of communion. During the Eucharist liturgy, we as a congregation pray the Lord's Prayer. Maybe when we get to the liturgy later in the service, the prayer will help us refocus. This is what I want you to meditate on: In the prayer, Jesus teaches us to **ask for God's reign to come**. What are we praying for? We are praying that God's work will be done here on the earth.

So, for me and us, maybe we can stretch our minds and brainstorm ideas on where our church can be working where the reign is not quite yet present. As you look around, I want to challenge you to see

where equity and justice have not been found. May we be courageous enough to see where hunger and thirst exist and those pains have not been alleviated and how we can ease those pains. This past week, we have seen and heard of mass killings in a night club that was a sanctuary for our LGBT siblings in Christ and in a Walmart where employees were there to do their job.

We can make a difference in these realms. One example was that on Thursday, we open our doors and N E W Door Sober Living put on a fantastic Thanksgiving meal. During their seven hours of cooking and serving, we welcomed **680** individuals and their hunger and thirst were alleviated for the day.

This may not seem like it fully connects with the text and I promise you that it does. For when we take a look at the passage and our mind wonders about the end times and how it is going to play out, this text points us to two themes. **The first theme comes in the form of a promise and the second theme is knowing, well actually it is not knowing.**

When it comes to the end times, there is a lot of not knowing. I mean in our short text, not knowing is named five times. When we do not know, it can lead individuals to despair, to not believing or to come up with some wild speculations on how the world is going to end. What if we embrace the condition of not knowing instead of attempting to simply overcome it. So, what are we to do? For me, we go back to the first theme, the promise.

The promise is that the Son of Man is coming back. But, that is not the only promise. God's nearness is in the world right now and we get to partner with God in the here and now. Thus, let us be awake and have our eyes wide open and see the mystery and the promise of the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary routines of life.

It is my hope and prayer that you can once again be excited about God's promises, we can be alert with the expectation and with knowing God's promises and having those promises in our heart, we can be courageous and live in faithful discipleship while waiting the coming of Christ our Lord.

Then finally, as I have reached my word count limit for the day, may we **place ourselves in position to see what God is doing.** Let us watch, be ready and then join in. **AMEN.**