

Watch!
Matthew 24:36-44

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A ninety-six year old man won fifty million dollars in the lottery. When his family was notified, they called their pastor for help since they were afraid the news might cause the old fellow to have a heart attack. The pastor agreed to help. He went over to visit the elderly man. They talked about the weather and life in general. Finally the minister asked the old man, "Suppose you won fifty million dollars, how would that change your life?" "It wouldn't," said the man, "I would still have arthritis. I would still be ninety-six years old. In fact, if I had fifty million dollars I would probably give it to the church." With that the minister had a heart attack and died.

Life is full of surprises, some good, some not so good. Advent is a season for surprises. It is a time to get ready—not for Christmas, but the Christ—the One who was, who is, and who is to come has arrived, is here and is yet to return. If that blows your sense of time and space, let me put it another way. The Babe of Bethlehem is the present Christ who is returning as King of kings and Lord of lords. I hope we'll all be ready. That's what Jesus was trying to say in the scriptures for today. The sermon in a single word is WATCH—pay attention, look, listen, be prepared, be faithful, be alert.

CHRIST IS COMING, BE PREPARED. The bi-partisan 9/11 commission made their final report to congress a month or so ago. They begin their report with these words. "September 11, was a day of unprecedented shock and suffering in the history of the United States. The nation was unprepared. The 9/11 attacks were a shock, but they should not have come as a surprise." What follows is a long list of warning signs that were generally ignored by the Clinton and Bush administrations in their pursuit of other matters.

Things have changed since then. Now the unofficial creed of the American Homeland war on terror is "Be Vigilant, Be Watchful, and Be Prepared." We must not be caught off guard again. There are Christians who approach the coming of Christ like the government deals with the war on terror. They ring out a danger and they announce a warning. With concern, you say, "You'd better get ready, you'd better watch out, because before you know it Christ will come."

People have been predicting it forever. Paul thought Christ would return in his lifetime. In the New Testament, Hippolytus, one of the early philosophers, predicted Christ would return in 500 A.D. Some were so sure the world was going to end in 1000 A.D. that they did not bother to plant crops. Martin Luther said in the 1500's "We have reached the time of the white horse of the apocalypse, this world can't last any longer." On April 3, 1843, one-half million Adventists

waited for the end of the world. Some even climbed mountains hoping for a head start to heaven. Remember the Y2K scare at the turn of the last millennium?

Life was filled with guns and wars; everyone got trampled on the floor.
I wish we'd all been ready.
Children died; the day grew cold; a piece of bread would buy a bag of gold.
I wish we'd all be ready.
There's no time to change your mind; the Son has come and you've been left behind.

Playing on the left behind theme, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins now have sold more than fifty million books and made a movie encouraging people not to be left behind.

I would like to paint a different picture of Christ's return. It seems to me that Jesus had a different story to tell. In Verse 36 we read, "*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" Who of us is smarter than Jesus? Jesus didn't even know. Why should we try to second guess the Savior?

It seems to me that the three parables told in Matthew, Chapter 25, illustrate what Jesus is trying to teach in Chapter 24. The first parable He tells at the beginning of Chapter 25 is the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins. It is the story of the bridegroom coming to claim his bride. It's not a war, but a wedding. A Middle Eastern wedding, filled with anticipation and surprise. Unlike Western weddings where it's all about the bride, in the Middle East, it's all about the groom. He comes to claim his bride and sweep her away to a week of festivity. Those with oil in their lamps were prepared to wait. While God is on time every time, he does not operate on our time.

He is trying to say be prepared by living wise. Don't be so engrossed with eating and drinking that the flame of your spiritual life flickers and fades. "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning." However long it takes, let me wait in faith.

There is a prayer in our ritual of burial and resurrection that I pray often, "Help us to live as those who are prepared to die and when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in You."

CHRIST IS COMING, BE FAITHFUL. "*Two men will be in the field; one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left*" (Verse 40).

We want to write it differently. One was at worship; the other at a Titans game. One was taken and one was left. One was leading the Sonshine Auction; one was visiting the casino. One was taken and one was left. This is not so in the Bible. Jesus puts ordinary people doing what ordinary people do.

There is a Negro Spiritual that I love.

There's a king and a captain high, and he's coming by and by
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.
You can hear his legions charging, the regions of the sky
And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

Jesus is saying, *"Be faithful weary pilgrim, the morning I can see, just take your cross and follow close to me."* St. Francis, Saint of Nature, was hoeing his garden one day. A philosopher friend approached him and asked, "What would you do if you learned you would die before the sun sets?" St. Francis reflected for a moment and replied, "I would finish hoeing my garden." I would be faithful with what I am doing now. Bonhoeffer was asked by critics, "Why do you expose yourself to all this danger? Jesus will return any day and all your work and suffering will be for nothing." Bonhoeffer said, "If Jesus returns tomorrow, then tomorrow I will rest from my labors, but today I have work to do. I must continue the struggle until I am finished."

John Wesley was asked one day, "What would you do if the Lord was coming tomorrow?" He answered, "I would get a good night's sleep and wake up in the morning and go on with my work for I would want Him to find me doing what He had appointed me to do."

As many of you already know, I have entered a new battle with my number one enemy. While there are tests yet to be conducted, it appears likely the cancer has returned. We will keep you informed as things unfold.

In the last ten days deep in my soul I have had to ponder the question, "What do I do now? Do I keep on keeping on, or do I hang it up and go home?" I never want to be a liability to this great church. I am depending on you to tell me when I can no longer do my job. In the meantime, I am inclined to work harder than I have ever worked before, live more urgently than ever before, take each moment and cherish each moment and experience it to the fullest. I hope he finds me hoeing cotton when he comes. For your prayers and patience, I will be eternally grateful.

The second parable Jesus tells following this teaching is the parable of the talents. You know it well. A man planning a journey called his servants together and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, each according to his ability. The five talent man put his money to work and gained five more. The two talent man gained two more. But the one talent man, trying to play it safe, hid what he had. To those who invested wisely the master said, *"Well, done, good and faithful servant."* The one talent man, trying to guard what he had, wound up losing what he had been given. Be faithful, Christ is coming.

CHRIST IS COMING, BE ALERT. *"Therefore, keep watch, for God is like a*

thief in the night" (Verse 42). What thief calls you up and says at 4:00 a.m., "I plan to break into your home tomorrow afternoon; I hope it's convenient for you." Thieves are illusive. They come when you least expect them, slip away without you ever knowing. Thieves don't make appointments, live by calendars, ask about convenience. They show up in unexpected places, do unanticipated things, leave without people knowing they ever came. It shocks us that God is compared to a thief, but we are wise to understand God's elusive nature. God shows up in the least expected places and when you are not looking, He is liable to be there. Open your eyes so you can see Him.

The third parable Jesus tells following this teaching is the parable of the sheep and goats. You remember it well. It is another of those kingdom parables. "*I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. And the righteous will answer, "Lord, when? I don't ever remember this."* I didn't go out on purpose to serve Christ, I was just doing what I needed to do in the moment taking care of what was before my eyes. When? I don't remember when I served you Christ." And the other half come in with the same kind of litany. "*I was hungry and you didn't give me anything to eat, thirsty and you didn't give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you ignored me. I needed clothes and you left me naked; I was in prison and nobody came to see me."* And they answer exactly the same, "*I don't remember when."* Those who fail the test of service respond with the same question, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, stranger, needing clothes, or sick or in prison and did not help you?" Open your eyes for Christ is closer than you can possibly imagine. **LOOK, WATCH, SEE.**

Martin, the Cobbler, is Leo Tolstoy's story about a lonely shoemaker who is promised in a dream that Christ will come to visit his shop. The next day Martin rises early, gets his shop ready, prepares a meal and waits. The only one who showed up in the morning was an old beggar who came by and asked for rest. Martin gave him a room he had prepared for his divine guest. The only one to show up in the afternoon was an old lady with a heavy load of wood. She was hungry and asks for food. He gave her the food he had prepared for his divine guest. As evening came, a lost boy wandered by. Martin took him home, afraid all the while he would miss the Christ. That night in his prayers he asks the Lord, "Where were You? I waited all day for You."

The Lord said to Martin:

“Three times I came to you friendly door,
Three times my shadow was on your floor.
I was a beggar with bruised feet.
I was the woman you gave to eat.
I was the child on the homeless street.”

Watch out! Christ may be closer than you can imagine.

When I was a boy on a Kentucky farm, relatives and neighbors would gather on summer evenings for fish fries and watermelon. While our parents raised crops and gossiped in the back yard, the children would play hide and seek. Since I was the youngest of the bunch, I was “it” a lot. I still remember the cadence of the count, five, ten, fifteen, twenty and finally to one hundred and the bold announcement, “READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!”

One much greater than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to tie, has come, is here and is yet to return says, “Ready or not, here I come.” Watch for Him.

Amen.

