

Ready or Not—He is Coming!

November 27, 2016 | 1st Sunday in Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶“No one knows when that day and hour will be, not the angels of heaven, not even the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷Just as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be when the Son of Man returns. ³⁸In fact, in the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the very day that Noah entered the ark. ³⁹And they did not realize what was coming until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man returns. ⁴⁰“At that time two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²So be alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: If the master of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house to be broken into. ⁴⁴You also need to be ready for this reason: The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Are you stumped over the perfect Christmas gift? Well, when in doubt, take some advice from a Prepper: nothing says “I care about you” more than a water purifier, a case of MRE’s, and a portable generator; all gifts which will prepare them for the end—you know, the end of civilization as we know it. Because that is exactly what Preppers do; they prepare for the unexpected: a global economic collapse, nuclear apocalypse, or a pandemic. “You never know... it could happen.” Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and traditionally in the Church this is a time to prepare; we are not preparing for an event that might happen, but an event Jesus has promised will happen: Ready or not—He is coming! And when we read Matthew 24:36-44 there are two other promises Jesus makes about this coming. First, He will come when we least expect it, and second, He will come to take away His people.

I. He will come when we least expect it

If you had grandparents or have ever known someone who has lived through the Great Depression in the 1930’s then you probably know what that generation always has in common. They will always save money away for a “rainy day.” They will hide their money in mattresses, in hidden vaults, some have even been known to bury money. All because you want to be prepared for a rainy day—a day when you might be in trouble and need that money. Financial advisors say that having an emergency fund is wise advice because it is going to rain.

In Noah’s day the rain did not stop. The Bible records that the fountains of the deep opened up and the entire planet was submerged under water. But were the people ready? The answer, sadly, is no. They were not ready. They were caught unprepared by the apocalypse of water. After the flood, God promised Noah that He would never send a disaster like that again—he would never wipe out the world with water. But He has promised that He will destroy the world with fire. That one day, Jesus Christ will return, and everything will be destroyed on that day. It will be the real doom’s day for those who are caught unprepared.

But what does it mean to be prepared? Well, every few years another person steps forward to tell everyone they have figured out some code and they know exactly when Jesus will come back—these people have never read this section of Matthew 24, because just in these few verses

Jesus says twice “No one knows the day or the hour... not even the Son of Man.” If Jesus even withheld this knowledge from Himself, how on earth could people figure it out? However, these words of Jesus, “no one knows the day or the hour” cut both ways. Yet as bad as it is to make false predictions about when the end of the world will come, it is every bit as bad to live as if it will never come—to live as if we still have more time. When was the last time tucking your kids into bed that you thought—tonight Jesus could return? Would it make you want to take an extra moment to say prayers with them?

So often, we think to ourselves, “No, Jesus can’t come back yet—things aren’t bad enough.” We expect some kind of global Armageddon event that will clue us into thinking—“ok, it’s coming soon.” Now the Bible does teach that there will be a “great tribulation” a period of intense suffering and persecution of the Church before Jesus returns. But when we read Matthew 24 closely, we see that that Tribulation had already begun with the disciples. Jesus told them that “they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you...” (vs. 9) and then later on (vs. 34) Jesus says, “this generation will by no means pass away till all these things have taken place.” The great tribulation began as soon as Jesus went into heaven and has been going on ever since. Christians are being persecuted, there have been wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, etc. Here in the United States we have the most terrifying kind of tribulation: apathy. Carelessness. There are more important things to do.

Jesus tells us that in Noah’s day people were “eating and drinking, marrying and given in marriage until the day Noah entered the ark.” There was no rain in the forecast! They were caught completely unaware, completely unexpectedly. But they did have a warning. There was a large awkward box of a boat, uselessly parked in the middle of a field. But the door on the side was wide open for any to enter and be saved. We are prepared for this coming doomsday when we repent and turn away from our sin. We are prepared when we gather our family and enter together into the Word of God—to the world a useless book—where the Lord declares to us the forgiveness of our sins. Wherever this message is read, preached, believed, and trusted there you will find people safely inside the ark.

II. He will come to take away His people

Now, when Jesus comes, He says it will be like the days of the flood: just as the Godly were saved the wicked were “taken away” or swept away by the flood waters, so too when Jesus returns, “two will be in the field, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and the other left.”

Sadly, these words can be misunderstood. If you have seen or read the Left Behind Series you may be familiar with rapture theory. Many Christians are taught that these words “one will be taken and one will be left” refer to a secret coming of Christ when all believers will disappear and miraculously be brought into heaven. You may have even seen the bumper stickers: “Warning in event of rapture this care will be unmanned.” To be fair, Jesus used this phrase twice with His disciples. The first time recorded in Luke 17 He was referring to believers being saved from destruction, but here in Matthew 24 Jesus is referring to unbelievers being taken away for destruction. From Scripture the answer is very clear. The same event that is the demise of the ungodly is the salvation of believers.

But why? Why believe in what is called a pre-tribulation rapture? It is because of fear. Fear of what will happen during the tribulation, fear of being left by God, persecuted. We all have different ways of facing these fears—some take comfort in a rapture, others of us face fear every day that our time of grace will come to an end. We certainly fear persecution, if not for us, we fear the world our children will grow up in. It seems like the world is becoming more and more violent, more and more dangerous—protesters in the streets, violent car chases, day care workers trying to hang babies. We want to leave a legacy of peace behind for the next generation, that we have made the world a better place.

But what does scripture say? Psalm 46 says, “Therefore we shall not fear though the earth give way, though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.” The question isn’t how will we survive this tribulation, but rather who is our God? Is our God going to abandon his children to suffer alone? No, He will not. He is the God who is strong to save and has demonstrated His power in the past: 1 Peter 3:20 tells us that the flood water—the dooms day—saved Noah and his family. God took the same event and worked it for the good of His people. The water brought God’s punishment to an ungodly unrepentant generation, but it also lifted Noah’s family above the destruction. God rescues us in the same way he saved Noah—one calamity that worked both judgment and salvation: One man, Jesus Christ, would come to die on a cross. With that one act, He suffered all of God’s judgment against sin, but He has given us eternal salvation through His sacrifice.

Just as Noah and Jesus lived, witnessed, suffered, but were physically lifted off the ground and brought to heaven, God will do the same for us—we will be “caught up” together with those who have died in the Lord into heaven to be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:17). And God’s seal, His unbreakable promise to work this miracle of salvation for you is found in your baptism; the personal flood event in your life: Peter says, you also have been saved by water—“not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God” (1 Pet. 3:18). It means the daily washing away of your sins on account of Jesus. It means you are God’s dearly beloved child, just like Noah, and if God was able to rescue Noah, then He will also work your rescue. He will rescue each one of us and bring us safely to His heavenly kingdom.

This Advent season, may we all be Preppers. May we all be caught up in preparing for Jesus’ second coming. Jesus coming is no doomsday event for us, but instead, it is our ultimate rescue. So come quickly Lord Jesus, come! Amen.