

AN UNEXPECTED HOUR

MATTHEW 24:36-44

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Each year on the first Sunday of Advent I am jolted into the season by the gospel reading, with the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great glory.

Our text this morning (and its parallels in Mark and Luke) is one that has been the focus of endless speculation and has been endlessly misinterpreted. Many Christians, particularly in the last few hundred years, have developed elaborate theologies of “the rapture” based on this passage in combination with a few others from Thessalonians.

In truth, the text is probably operating on two levels: 1) predicting the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD (hence verse 34, with its prediction of these things happening within the coming generation; and 2) talking about the end times.

Some Christians ignore the original context entirely and make Jesus words about being “left behind” into some kind of elaborate rapture theology where Christians are sucked up like a vacuum cleaner into heaven while other unfortunate souls are “left behind.”

(Even though if we read this passage in its first-century Jewish context, with the city of Jerusalem being laid siege to by invading armies, the ones who are taken might well have been the unfortunate ones, and the ones left behind the lucky ones.)

These Christians tend to ignore the metaphorical and symbolic nature of all apocalyptic writing, and try to plot timelines and link the second coming of Christ with political events and rulers (despite Jesus’ clear statement that ‘no one knows the hour or day’).

Other Christians focus *exclusively* on the original context and make the text *only* about the first-century destruction of Jerusalem, ignoring the future return and judgment of Christ entirely.

As is so often the case, the truth is more complicated. Jesus is talking about the coming devastation of his people and the destruction of Jerusalem *and* about his future return, if perhaps not in the way that this has been popularized in speculative American books and movies.

But leaving thorny matters of exegesis aside, why do we read this ominous text on the first Sunday of Advent each year?

Does God want us to be anxious fearful creatures, constantly scanning the skies or our newspapers wondering if this, finally, is the moment when the Son of Man returns to judge the earth?

Are we supposed to be constantly taking our spiritual temperature to make sure that when the moment comes we're not going to be "left behind?"

I don't think so.

But as Christians we *are* supposed to be people who know what time it is.

This text and texts like it show up on the first Sunday of Advent every year for a very specific reason: to remind us that as Christians we are living in between advents.

Each year during the season of Advent, we talk about "waiting for the Christ child," and this is good. Advent *is* a season of anticipation, and we *are* symbolically entering into the story of Israel and Israel's waiting for her Messiah.

It's good and important for our hearts to prepare room for the Christ child, Immanuel, God with us.

But as Christians, for whom Christ has *already come*, as those who are constituted as a people by that first coming, the season of Advent is a time when we are reminded that we now wait not for Christ's *first* coming as a child, but for Christ to come in glory.

This is the coming that we now look forward to with gladness and anticipation during the season of Advent.

That's why on the First Sunday of Advent each year, we read texts about the Son of Man coming in glory.

As I thought about this text, and as I thought about our world, and as I thought about my own life and the life of many that I care about, my thoughts zeroed in on preparing for the "unexpected hour."

Unexpected hours come in all shapes and sizes, don't they?

Maybe it's a diagnosis... or a death... or the breakdown of a marriage... or estrangement from a child... or a vocational crisis... or a bankruptcy...

Or maybe it's a crisis of faith.

We wake up one day and we wonder if the God we've been avoiding all our lives might be real.

Or, if the God we've taken for granted all of our lives might be more complicated than we thought.

Or we realize that all the nice tidy answers we thought we had sorted out don't work the way they used to any more.

There are so many "unexpected hours" that can catch us unprepared in this life, leaving us stunned, disoriented and reeling.

I've talked to many people who have been through one of the situations I've described who say things like...

- I don't know how I got here...
- How did this happen to me?...
- Why didn't I see this coming?"

And all these unexpected hour can be occasions that point us to a vitally important truth:

Each moment of our lives is an opportunity to live attentively, watchfully, and expectantly.

It's easy to focus on the comings of God that are decisive and climactic, like Christmas or the second coming of Christ.

But God also comes to us in countless ways in everyday life.

We are daily given opportunities to cultivate attitudes and lifestyles of attentiveness, to God, to ourselves, to others.

Or not.

It's so easy to slide into autopilot mode, isn't it? It's easy to go along with the flow, drifting along with cultural rhythms of distracting ourselves with shopping and entertainment and recreation, neglecting our relationships, failing to pay attention to God, chasing after that which will not last, living ungratefully and carelessly, ignoring the ways in which God comes to us in countless ways each day to remind us that life is short, that how we live and love matters, that we will be called to give an account of our days.

It's easy—*very* easy—to live inattentive lives:

- To the brevity and fragility of life
- To the relationships that matter most
- Most of all, to God

But through it all, Christ comes to us asking, always, "To which king and which kingdom are you giving your life? How are you spending your days? What will last? When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Will you be read for his coming? Are you ready for how he comes to you even now?

The focus of our text today isn't on when the Son of Man comes, much as Christians have made this the focus.

The point of the passage comes at the end.

“Be ready, be watchful, be awake.”

This is the point, not zeroing in and agonizing over the crisis moments whether it's the end of days or the end of Jerusalem or the crisis moments that may come in our own lives, but to focus on the intervening time, *before* these arrive.

I like how Catherine Caimano puts it in her commentary on this text:

In our Gospel story, despite its ominous overtones, the theme of what Jesus is saying is to be prepared. To know that our lives as Christians are not just measured by our attendance at church, or our assent to certain beliefs, but also by how we live our ordinary lives -- eating and drinking, working and living together.

Our faith is about how Jesus Christ, born into this world as a small spot of light in the darkness, helps us to believe, and to live like we believe, that love and forgiveness and redemption and hope have a part in every choice that we make, in every regular day on our calendar.

And this sense of preparation, of not knowing when it is that we will most need to be ready, is not meant to scare us; it is meant to remind us that the kingdom of heaven is everywhere, even when we least expect it.¹

On this first Sunday of Advent, I think our reminder is a simple one.

Don't sleepwalk through life. Pay attention to the God who comes to you in every season of life. Don't live on autopilot.

Unexpected hours will come. This is the nature of life.

To be human is to live with not knowing.

We don't know how long we will be around for... or how long those we love will be around for... or what global events might ensue... or when a crisis might arrive... or what our relationships might demand of us.

¹ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/why-advent-the-hardest-times-for-faithful-christians>

Or when Christ will come in glory.

There is so much we don't know. But if we have decided to follow Jesus, to cast our lot with this king and his kingdom, we *do* know whose comings our hope and our future is defined by.

We know that the one whose comings we rehearse each Advent is full of grace and truth, that he can be trusted with all that we do not know, all of our unexpected hours.

So, live expectantly. Live attentively. Live deliberately and thoughtfully. Live lives of generous love and confident hope.

Christ has come. Christ comes to you now. Christ will come again.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

