

“Wake Up!”  
Matthew 24:36-44  
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36 ‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

A week ago Monday, I spent the whole day in an anxious tizzy. As many of you have probably heard, an incredible team of folks from the local faith community have banded together to take on cold-weather sheltering this year in partnership with Love Overwhelming in the First Christian Church building. And last weekend, all the way through the day Monday, I was incessantly

watching the weather and calling the City Manager's office to find out *when* exactly he would call a severe weather event. Under our current ordinances, a severe weather event is called by the city manager when the government weather service is predicting two consecutive days with 32 degree or below temperatures. Our shelter leadership has agreed that we will only operate on nights that a severe weather event is in effect, so we were all waiting on pins and needles.

There was a promise that our shelter would open. And we all knew the cold weather was on its way. We just didn't know *when*. And that uncertainty sent me into an anxiety-ridden panic of eyes-glued-to-phone for weather updates and a sea of worried thoughts. The not-knowing had sent me into a wilderness of fear, a wilderness where I found myself feeling isolated and small.

I share this, because so many throughout history have taken this text, a text about the not-knowing, and have similarly turned it into bad news that makes us anxious and afraid. Books and movies have been produced that take this whole passage as an invitation to start anxiously predicting the exact time that God will come to us again. There was an entire movement in the late 90s and early 2000s that took that one verse about one being taken and one being left and made it about the faithful being beamed up to heaven, leaving only their clothes behind to rub it in the face of every un-taken person, who apparently had not been chosen as God's elect. It sounds like a ridiculous interpretation when one reads this passage in context. It was probably referencing the invading forces that came through Jerusalem before the fall of the temple, focusing on the uncertainty of not knowing who would be

left after the invading forces had their way.<sup>1</sup> It's ironic, really, that the first thing we humans want to do with this text that explicitly says that we do not know when God is coming is try to use the text to start guessing exactly when God is coming.

But before we get a little too judge-y about all that anxious speculation, let's pump the brakes. I wonder if we respond with anxious speculation when uncertainty rears its head in our own lives. Perhaps as you sit here this morning, it sounds familiar to you to find yourself lost in fear because of all that you do not know. Maybe it is part of the human condition to head straight into the isolated wilderness of anxiety whenever we are confronted with uncertainty.

But if we can put aside just for a moment the doomsday fortune-telling of our culture and the dread that fills our own hearts when we cannot know the details of the future, we may actually be able to hear the good news that is in this text. For this idea that no one knows the day or the hour that God will come to us is not meant to be a slippery slope of fear. It is meant to be a relief, a great letting-go for us humans who constantly try to white-knuckle our control of the future. For inside the uncertainty of the great not-knowing is the promise that God is surely coming. The text does not say, "Be ready, just in case the Son of Man decides to show up like we hope he will." It says, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man *is* coming at an unexpected hour." Every single time that God's coming is referenced in this text, it's never with an "if" or a "maybe". It's always with sure phrases about the God who "is coming" and a promised future that "will be".

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, "Matthew for Everyone: Part 2 - Chapters 16-28," Westminster John Knox Press, pg.127.

And as we begin to relax into that promise, our text also gives us an alternative pathway to walk when we come to that sign in the road that reads “uncertainty.” And we know that place all too well, don’t we? It’s the place we reach when we don’t know how things will unfold in the future of that relationship, or in the health of our bodies, or in the state of our nation, or in the next chapter of life that we were never supposed to live without that person who is no longer with us. There is another path we can choose when uncertainty surrounds us, and this is again where we find good news.

This Advent, our text lays out a pathway for us called “keep awake”. It’s a road nicknamed “be ready.” How do we begin traveling down this road of wakefulness and readiness? Well, as I think back to that anxious day I spent trying to predict when the city would call a severe weather event, I realized that, in a way, I was actually asleep. I was asleep to the promise of God I had seen springing up in my colleagues over these past months as we all sensed God doing a new thing in our community. I was asleep to dozens of beautiful moments that had exemplified God’s faithfulness on our journey, from the generous offering of a building in a struggling church for shelter space to the over \$25,000 that had come from our community seemingly out of nowhere to propel this vision into reality. I was asleep to the community that had been growing up miraculously to form a visible body of Christ all around me, a community that had been reaching out to my anxious self all week saying, “God’s got this. Let’s keep going. We can do this with God’s help.” The promise of what God was doing had been there all along. But I needed to

wake up. For it is only in that space of wakefulness that any of us can be ready to receive the God who is indeed coming to us.

Friends, I wonder if we have been doing the wrong thing with uncertainty. We thought this great not-knowing was a curse. But what if it was intended as a gift? What if Jesus' saying that we don't know the day or hour of God's coming was actually his way of saying, "You know that uncertainty you feel? I, who became human to be with you, am feeling it too, and that uncertainty is meant to be embraced. That uncertainty and the life of faith are sisters. They hold hands. They are meant to be together." It is no accident that this text comes to us when the year is almost at its darkest, when it is most difficult for us not to fall asleep. For uncertainty is actually a candle flame burning bright, inviting us to "wake up" and "be ready" for the coming of a God who not only holds the future, but also holds us in the palm of Her hand. Amen.