

“The Attitude of Readiness”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 24:36-44

Theme: Advent, readiness

Occasion: Advent, Year A

A certain author tells of the time when he was *not* ready for the opportunity of a lifetime. Like many young men, he dreamed of playing baseball in the big leagues but never thought the opportunity would come his way. Suddenly, it materialized as he was scanning the want ads for a summer job.

The Toronto Blue Jays were having tryouts in his hometown. His baseball cleats were rusty and his pony league uniform was layered with dust, but he decided to go for it. Why not?!

After arriving at the try-out site, his anxieties soared. He even imagined that he heard some of the other players sharpening their spikes. “How long ya been practicing for this?” one hopeful asked another. “Bout six months. Wish I started sooner, he moaned.”

Our would-be, big-league player had already struck out. He knew it, and it was too late to do anything about it. People who have their minds set on playing baseball know the importance of readiness. When the opportune pitch comes over their home plate, they are ready to swing for all they’re worth. They won’t always connect, but they are prepared to play the game with gusto.

It is the same attitude of readiness that is required of all who would follow Christ. That is what today’s Gospel reading is all about. When the Bible speaks about the return of Christ and the end of history, many people get caught up in the debate of **when** it will happen. But Jesus’ words about “the coming of the Son of Man” don’t try to answer that question. Instead,

Jesus urges us to stay alert – to remain ready. We are to be at our posts, doing our God-given assignments, whether Christ’s return is near or distant

In the first part of the 19th century, a man name William Miller spent a long time studying what the Bible says about the future and concluded that the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world would occur sometime between October 1843 and October 1844.

He gathered a lot of followers and as the end of the period approached, their anticipation became intense. On the last night of the window of opportunity, some of Miller’s disciples gathered on a hill outside of town wearing white robes, waiting for Jesus to appear.

One joker, who wasn’t impressed by the prediction snuck up behind them, blew a blast on his trumpet. Some of the believers leaped into the air, expecting to be caught up in the clouds. They weren’t.

Well, you might think this would have put an end to the practice of trying to predict the end of the world, but you would be wrong. People started trying to figure out where Miller had gone wrong and to revise his calculations. They formed church bodies that gave a lot of attention to the nearness of the Second Coming.

The end-time business is now a flourishing enterprise. The *Left Behind* series of books and movies has had a tremendous success. And you can tune in to one of the religious channels on almost any night and hear about the signs of the End. A lot of people believe it.

And a lot don’t. Many Christians, especially in the mainline denominations, took a very different lesson from Miller’s mistake. “Nobody’s going to make us look stupid!” “You won’t find me on a hilltop in a white bathrobe with some trumpet-blowing comedian waiting to make a fool of me.” “We’ll just steer clear of any talk about the Second Coming.”

“We don’t expect God to rend the heavens, raise the dead and come to judge the world. We don’t expect God to do much of anything.”

And since we don’t anticipate anything out of the ordinary happening, we can go back to sleep. Unless – I hope – we pay attention to the words of Jesus in today’s gospel: “Keep awake!” *There* he emphasizes the need to be ready.

His words are not intended to help us calculate when the end of the world will happen. In fact, he emphasizes we will *not* know that. “The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” He says that not even the Son knows the hour of it happening, only the Father. The point is not to figure out when it will be, but for us to be at our posts and ready when it happens.

Our anticipation is not based on a prediction of when the world will come to an end. On the contrary, we are told, “Keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” or for that matter what century. You *don’t* know and you’re *not* going to know. That’s why you have to stay awake. If you know when something is going to happen, you can set the alarm and settle down for a long nap.

On the other hand, the point isn’t that we are to literally stay awake all the time on some kind of spiritual caffeine. So what does it mean to live in hope and expectation of God’s final future – to think that any day Christ might come? Would you sell everything and go to Jerusalem to wait for him to descend? Would you walk the streets carrying a sign saying “The End is Near”? I don’t think so. Well then, what does it mean to be ready?

One of C.S. Lewis’s essays is titled “The World’s Last Night.” What should we do, he asks, if we knew that tonight would be the world’s last? His answer might surprise you. When Christ comes, Lewis said, we should be found doing the task to which God has called us.

The emergency room nurse should go to work her or his shift because there will be people there who are hurt and scared, even in the world's last night. The air traffic controller should stay at his or her post because there will be people who need to get home safely, even in the world's last night. No matter what your calling, that is what you should be doing.

Martin Luther answered a similar question with a somewhat different emphasis. When asked what he would do if he knew that the world was going to end tomorrow, Luther said, "I would plant a cherry tree." God's purpose is not to destroy the world, but to renew it and transform it, and each one of us doing our job is a little bit of that transformation.

The world has gone on for over 2,000 years since Jesus spoke to his disciples about the coming of the Son of Man. Just on statistical grounds, it is unlikely that tonight or even tomorrow night will be the world's last. But we aren't called to make that calculation. Our calling is to stay on the job, and to be ready at our posts.

This Advent, amidst all of the extra things that get added to our busy lives, may we stay awake, remain ready, and continue to do the things Christ has called us to do. May we be found faithful, whether Christ returns this month, or 2,000 years from now. Amen? Amen!