

## **“Ready or Not, Here He Comes!”**

**Text: Matthew 24:36-44**

Prayer: God of Advent hope, here and now, open our hearts and minds to understand this difficult passage before us. We ask for your guidance. Amen.

Whether we like it or not, the first Sunday of Advent gives us a taste of “apocalypse”. Darkness, fear and foreboding define the landscape of the first Sunday of Advent, falling over the human spirit. Advent, as a path towards Christmas, is filled with dark tales: risky and dangerous journeys, fear and uncertainty in Mary’s heart, anguish in Joseph’s mind, shepherds stumbling through the Bethlehem night, rumors from foreigners that alarm Herod and ignite his rage, the Refugee Baby and his parents in their flight to Egypt and so on.

In the reading from Matthew’s gospel, we hear Jesus telling his disciples about the signs of the end of times. According to Matthew, you can look for all the signs you want, but there won't be any warning, like a thief coming to your house in the middle of the night. You need to stay awake, to be prepared, to be vigilant. It's not exactly the message we want to hear on this first Sunday of Advent when we are gearing up towards our journey to Bethlehem. We humans like to know everything! We are advocates of the “knowledge is power” movement. We cannot help guessing, estimating, assuming, interpreting, or predicting those unknowns, particularly the controversial “end of time.”

If you could learn exactly when and how your life would end, would you want to know? If you could learn exactly when and how the world would end, would you want to know? If you could learn exactly who would be taken and who would be left, and why, would you want to know? I have to tell you honestly that I have difficulty preaching this text because I am not sold to its literal interpretation. So today, I will preach from my authentic point of view using a metaphorical or symbolic interpretation of this passage.

Some Christians, when reading and listening to this text, have the tendency to read it literally. Some contend that this passage is about the fundamental notion of “rapture”, based on the literal reading of the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. Rapture is the belief in the second coming of Christ, descending from a cloud with trumpets blasting, and all the ones who truly believed in him and persisted in the Christian faith will vanish in the air and will be brought to a

heavenly paradise. And for those who do not believe in Jesus, God will judge them and they will be left behind in a place called “hell”.

This passage in Matthew has been taken over by the followers of a series of books and literature called *Left Behind* written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Millions of Christians around the world who follow this teaching describe Jesus' coming again to slaughter everyone who is not a born-again Christian. According to their interpretation of this scripture, all the world's Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Jews, not to mention, the atheists, the non-believers, Roman Catholics and those of us in the mainline Protestant denominations who are not born again will be thrown into hell in the second coming of Christ. Pretty scary stuff, if you ask me! The *Left Behind* movement has gone far beyond simple religious proclamation into a very successful business venture. They have websites and blogs, they are on Facebook, Youtube, DVD's, movies, yes even on bumper stickers. One sticker says, "in case of rapture, this car will not have a driver."

I don't know about you, but I do not buy this particular belief. For one thing, it is very exclusive and it does not speak to me of a God of love, of justice and compassion, but rather a vengeful God who plays favouritism- a God whose grace is inhospitable to others. Are we saying that all non-born-again Christians will be judged? Even if they practice love, justice and kindness? This is my honest interpretation of this text and I do not mean to impose my stand on any of you. Instead of preparing ourselves for an unknown future or the fear to be left behind, why don't we live knowing that God is already here and now in the world? Rather than assuming there will be an end of time, I am far more convinced of the idea of God's time and God's actions throughout time. Rev. Patricia de Jong puts it this way: *“The advent of God's time is not solely about God's coming at the end of time, but God's intrusion into our human story in this time.”* When Matthew declares Jesus as saying that the Son of Man will come again – I interpret it to be: *God breaking into our lives with grace and blessings again and again when we least expect it.* For sure, Matthew, who was very Jewish in his mindset and who wrote for a very Jewish community, brings in stories of the past to illustrate his position. God's grace breaks into our lives like in Noah's time before the flood, when people were busy drinking, marrying and having the best times of their lives. In their busyness – they have failed to recognize the presence of God's grace breaking into the ordinariness of their lives, until Noah

entered the ark and we know the rest of the flood story. But the story did not end in vain – in God's time, in God's moment, God's grace came in the form of a rainbow, a sign of hope for the people and the whole of creation.

Barbara Kingsolver has a book of essays called "Small Wonder," and it is a poetic proclamation of the power of hope. It is also a harsh criticism against the excessive self-centeredness of America. Taking a sharp look at the wars, the natural disasters, the political violence of the 21st century, she writes a modern translation of the apocalypse. By the end of the book, the reader is confronted about the wastefulness of food consumption, the natural disasters caused by genetic crop engineering, the distortion of patriotism, the horrors of war and capital punishment. But she ends with good news - soaring words of hope--a call to self-discipline and compassion and tolerance and moral living--a vision that matches the energy of Jesus' words for us today. Rather than feeling hopeless, Kingsolver suggests that we should bang on the door of hope and refuse to let anyone suggest that no one is paying attention. She writes, "What I can find is this and so it has to be: conquering my own despair by doing what little I can. Stealing thunder, tucking it in my pocket to save for the long drought.

Inspired by Kingsolver's wisdom, I thought to myself, what if we prepared differently this year? I read about a project called the "Advent Conspiracy." It was started by a group of Christians who conspired to change the way we celebrate Christmas. These co-conspirators discovered that North Americans spend over \$450 billion each year buying Christmas presents. They also learned that the greatest health problem in the world today is the lack of clean water. It would cost \$10 billion to solve that problem. They wonder--what if we bought one less Christmas gift this year--you know, the sweater that will never be worn, the candle that will never get lighted, or the knickknack that will get returned the day after Christmas? They wonder--what if we took the money saved by not buying that gift and gave it to help someone in need, like folks who need clean water? They wonder--since Christmas began with a group of people who follow the ways of Jesus, what if we conspired together to make this year a better Christmas story for us?

For us here at BCUC, as we proclaim Jesus as the gift of hope, what if we conspired with the folks in Chipembi to support their building project? What if we conspired to support the Christmas Hampers to feed the hungry? What if we conspired to buy less and donate to the

Mission and Service Fund? What if we conspired as advocates of truth and reconciliation? Instead of paying more attention to “doomsday conspiracy”, let us start our own "Advent Conspiracy" as we anticipate the birth of Jesus.

In this advent time of waiting and getting ready, Matthew tells us to stay awake! Persists in doing good for others. Be conscious of God's presence and God's grace breaking into your lives. Stay awake to what is happening around you. Stay awake to the pains of this world, to the aches for freedom and justice. God will come again and again to everyone – including those who have failed to acknowledge God's presence in their lives – God will come again to this aching, hurting, celebrating world we have.

Friends, as you come to celebrate God's table of grace, how is God inviting you to stay awake? How are you preparing for the birth of Christ? What are the things or experiences that keep you centered on God? What is it that you long for in these Advent days? Let these words of the former Moderator, Mardi Tindal, inspire us in our waiting. She writes, “Advent is an invitation to listen to God's music of abundance over scarcity; joy over fear; hope over despair – imagining, dancing, and behaving according to God's ways, and trusting the truth of the angel's assurance of abundance, joy, hope, and love. These are the ways of God's peace in the world.” Advent is God's time. It is God's moment. Let us make it holy. Thanks be to God. Amen.