

Advent 1—A  
**Matthew 24:36-44**  
Be Ready

The superintendent of a large Christian school was concerned about the disarray he found in so many of the classrooms he visited. Papers were often strewn on the floor, and the students' desks were surrounded by clutter. Feeling strongly that learning could not take place in such an untidy environment, he decided to take action. He chose one classroom for an experiment, introduced himself to the students and with a smile made this proposition: "Your teacher, principal, and I provide a well-equipped classroom for you to enjoy but we need your help in keeping your desks and the classroom orderly. Many of you have crumpled papers inside your desks with books left open and the pages bent. Often there are pencils on the floor under your desks along with other debris. I would like each of you to clean out your desk today and begin this school year resolving to keep it clean. One day I will return and inspect your desks and everyone with a perfectly neat desk will be given \$1000. I won't tell you which day it will be. It will be a surprise. Not even your teacher or the principal will know the day."

The children squealed with excitement and began immediately pulling things from their desks, filling the trash baskets with crumpled papers, stacking their books neatly inside their desks, and neatly lining up their pencils and pens. Every morning for the first week, every student checked his or her desk to make sure it was in perfect condition, confident that today would be the day the superintendent returned. The next week, a few boys grew weary of the exercise and returned to their former habits. By the third week, several students remarked, "I doubt if he'll come back at all. He just said that to make us keep our desks clean." After two months, no one in the classrooms bothered to inspect their desks and in fact, forgot the superintendent's promise.

Except for one girl. Dutifully, she inspected her desk every morning and several times a day, making sure things were in proper order. For months, she was teased by the other students. "He's not coming back! Why do you keep looking for him? You look stupid believing that promise, anyway." Still, she remained quiet, kept her desk in perfect condition and waited. Near the end of the school year, there was a knock on the door and the superintendent entered. Quickly, the students flung open their desks and began frantically to clean them. But the superintendent held up his hand for them to stop. All the students were asked to stand beside their desk at attention while the superintendent inspected each desk. One after another, he rejected them for being messy. One boy tried giving excuses but to no avail. Another blamed the teacher for not reminding them. Still another blamed the superintendent for making them wait so long.

Finally, the superintendent arrived at the desk of the little girl who confidently displayed her well-kept desk while beaming at the superintendent. After inspecting her desk, he took her by the hand to the front of the classroom and awarded her \$1000. "Boys and girls," he said kindly, "this girl never stopped believing I would return so she kept her desk in perfect order. She didn't need to worry about what day or even what time of day I would arrive because she was always ready. Always." Ready—that is the key word for our gospel lesson this morning. "Be ready."

We have entered a new church year again as we are in the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a time to look ahead to the coming of Jesus as a babe in the manger. It is also a time for looking ahead for the second coming of Christ. Our gospel lesson says very plainly “*You also must be ready for this reason: The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him*” (44).

Jesus tells us that most people won’t be ready, and compares the world at Judgment Day to the world at the time of the flood: “*Just as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be when the Son of Man returns. In fact, in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the very day Noah entered the ark. And 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*” (37-39). What was wrong with those people at the time of the flood? They weren’t ready. They had no relationship with God. Their entire lives revolved around earthly things, and nothing else. I’m sure they all knew about Noah, the man building the boat in the desert. But they ignored that. They ignored having any real type of relationship with God. And then the flood came, and took them all away.

That’s how it will be, Jesus says, when he comes again. There will be two groups of people: believers and unbelievers. Those who are ready and those who are not. Look at the examples Jesus uses: “*Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left*” (40-41). Two women will be out shopping—one will be ready, and one will not when Jesus returns. A family gathers together for Thanksgiving—three of them are ready for Christ’s return, and three of them are not. Two businessmen meet for lunch—one is ready, and one is not.

Jesus is emphasizing here how some will be ready for his second coming, and some will not. The rest of the Bible gives us a clearer picture of the events that take place when Jesus comes. There will be a loud trumpet call from God. Jesus will come with all of his angels, riding the clouds, and everything will stop. He’ll raise the dead. Then those who are believers, those who are ready for his arrival, will be lifted up from this earth and will meet the Lord in the sky (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The unbelievers, those who aren’t ready, will be left behind to be judged, and to be sent to hell.

Imagine that the end of the world would take place at 5:00 this afternoon. What do you normally do at 5:00 on a Sunday afternoon? At that moment, everything will stop. Everything is done. You will hear the trumpet call of God, the voice of the archangel. According to the Bible, all the dead will be physically raised to life. You and all the other believers will be caught up into the sky to be with Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:17). That’s what these verses are referring to. What about the unbelievers who are left behind? Jesus tells us in John 5 that he will judge them and throw them immediately into hell (John 5:28-29). Then the world as we know it will be destroyed, and a new heaven and earth will be created, a place where believers can worship God free from sin. That’s how God describes the last day in his Word.

Are you preparing for this day? Or, are you procrastinating? A spiritual procrastinator is someone who’s not ready. Someone who says: “Eventually I’ll get my act together spiritually. But not right now. I have too much going on.” Is our world ready for Jesus’ second coming? A fable is told about three apprentice devils who were talking with Satan about their plans to destroy all of humanity. The first apprentice suggested that they would succeed, if they told people that there was no God. Satan rejected that suggestion, because he realized that most

people know that there is a God and would not be convinced otherwise. The second apprentice suggested they could succeed by telling people that there is no hell. But Satan rejected that idea because he knew that too many people know that there is a hell. Then the third apprentice devil spoke up: “Let’s destroy all humanity by telling them that there is no hurry. Judgment Day hasn’t come for thousands of years and is not about to come in the next five minutes. So take your time!” The fable concludes that Satan loved that suggestion because he knew that people would procrastinate in their spiritual lives, and would be destroyed by the millions.

Jesus’ main point with all of this is verse 42: “*So be alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*” Later Jesus says that he will come at a time when we do not expect him. The sad thing is: most people are not ready. Our second lesson for today from Romans 13 describes what it looks like to not be ready. Verse 13 talks about *drunkenness*. Lots of people use this time of the year as an excuse to get drunk. If Jesus returns, and that’s you—what will he do with you? “*Sexual immorality*” is mentioned, that and money are the two driving forces in our country. If you let yourself get caught up in that and Jesus returns—you’re not ready—then what? “*Dissension and jealousy*” are mentioned. These basically refer to people not getting along with each other—fighting with people, not apologizing, not asking for forgiveness, and not forgiving. If that’s you, and Jesus returns—you’re not ready.

All of these things come from what? They all come from our sinful hearts, don’t they? Even though we are Christians, we still, at times, fall into the same sins that our unbelieving friends do. There are times in our lives when we let our faith get very stale, when we grow very distant from Jesus Christ, and then we start living and talking just like the unbelieving world. Our sin makes us unprepared for Christ’s coming.

What about us? We struggle with this too, don’t we? “I will grow in my spiritual life,” we say, “but I will grow later.” I will pray, but I will figure out how to do that later. I will live like a child of God, but later in my life. I have plenty of time. It’s OK for me now, to not grow, to not pray, to live like my unbelieving friends. I have time. What happens when we live that way? Our relationship with God falls apart. And then Jesus comes when we least expect him, and it’s too late. You can’t get it together spiritually on Judgment Day. Time’s up. And then you are left behind, judged, and sent to hell.

But that’s not it will be for us, is it? You and I can pray to our Savior. We can repent and rejoice that Jesus forgives us. He forgives us for our lack of watchfulness and our lack of readiness. That’s why Jesus was born on Christmas many years ago. His whole purpose was to take away our sin. He did that by living a life that perfectly glorified God and then he gave us the credit. He did that by taking all of our shortcomings, our spiritual procrastination, all of our sins, and he took them on himself and paid for them by dying on the cross. He rose from the dead to prove to us that we really are forgiven, that we really are going to rise from the dead someday and glorify God in the life to come. You are a child of God—a modern day Noah. Because of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for you, you are one of those people who will be with him on the last day.

Until that day, Jesus tells us: “*So be alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming*” (42). Jesus compares himself to a thief in the night: “*You also need to be ready for this reason: The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him*” (44). A large number of Christians today don’t believe that Jesus will come during their lifetime. But in these verses, Jesus tells us to live as though he will come during our lifetimes. A Christian is someone

who is always preparing, always watchful, and always ready for the moment everything stops. That doesn't mean that we stop doing the things we do. Those religious cults that tell people to quit their jobs and sit up on a mountain and wait for the end of the world. They are way off. That's not what Jesus means when he says to prepare, to be ready.

You can tell when someone is ready for Christmas—you see lights, trees, garland, decorations, bows, fake snow—you look at that house and you say to yourself, "That's what a house ready for Christmas looks like." But what does a person look like, who's prepared for Christ's second coming?

And how do we get ready? We are ready for his second coming by being like that little girl in our story—daily preparation. We are to keep our desks clean, or in other words, we are to repent daily. Take off the dirty old self and put on the clean new self. Luther talks about this as he tells us to drown our old self daily in the waters of our Baptism and then to rise up again as a new, forgiven person living in the grace of God. We are to be ready for the coming of Christ through our act of repentance. Repentance does not just happen once, it is a daily activity we must do to be ready for his second coming. Daily, like that girl in our first story, we must clean our desks, so to speak. We must clean our selves daily, so we are ready for the second coming of Christ. Daily preparation is important. Daily I must repent because we do not know the time or place of his second coming. Daily I must repent because daily I sin. Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that I do not have to repent because I am good enough for God. We are never good enough for God. We are sinful people who need the daily washing away of our sins. Because of Christ I can repent and begin over again. And this happens daily if we are truly honest with ourselves that I am a sinful creature who needs to repent of my sins.

It is the robe of righteousness that Christ gave to us at our baptism that he will recognize when he returns. A little girl who lived during World War 2 was sent away to boarding school for a lengthy period of time during the war. On the train ride home, another girl asked her how her mother would be able to recognize her after being gone so long. This was a disturbing thought. Then the girl remembered: "My mother made this dress for me. She will recognize me by my dress." In the same way Christ will recognize us by the robe of righteousness we received at our baptism.

The time to get ready is now. Remember, Christ is coming to judge those who have rejected him. But he's also coming to bless you. Children always look forward to Christmas with eagerness and excitement. We can look forward to Judgment Day the same way. Christ, your Savior, is coming to bless us.

May the Advent season be for you a joyful time, a hopeful time, and a time when you recommit yourself to being a watchful Christian. We rejoice now that Jesus came on Christmas, but we also look forward to rejoicing then, when Jesus will come unexpectedly on Judgment Day. We pray: O Lord, give me the heart of Noah, a heart that is watchful, that is ready, for the day you come. Amen.