

Today is a very special day in the life of the Church. One, today signals the beginning of a new Church year. So Happy New Year! And two, today is also the First Sunday of Advent, a time when we Christians focus on the anticipation of waiting for Jesus to come into our world. And as we prepare for that to happen, our first thoughts usually focus on that very first Christmas when Jesus was born.

But seven centuries earlier, during Isaiah's time, the people of Israel were in dire need of some hope. Keep in mind that Isaiah wrote this passage during one of the darkest periods of Israel's history when they were being attacked by Assyria. It's people had turned away from God and were worshiping idols. Plus, not only was the Jewish population that lived there deported to Assyria, but the land was re-populated with pagan gentiles who didn't worship the Lord.

And yet, even though it was a dark time, Isaiah's prophecy brought hope to the people by saying God would once again honor Israel. And 700 years before it happens, Isaiah predicts that a child will be born, a royal birth from the line of David, and he would rule.

While Isaiah's prophecy described the people as walking in darkness, by the time of Jesus' birth they are certainly living in darkness. In the intervening years the people of Israel had gone through exile, deportation, and many horrific situations. The people are poor, sick, downtrodden, and oppressed under Roman rule. They are living in the land of the shadow of death when suddenly Jesus' birth will signal the dawn of a whole new era when God will come to be with his people. And it will be like a bright light shining in the darkness.

But we must remember, Christ is also coming again. The entire Old Testament looked forward to Christ's first coming but the entire New Testament looks forward to his second coming. And as surely as Christ came the first time, **ready or not**, he will come again.

And given the condition of **this** world, we too need to know there's hope for a better future, don't we? Wars are raging. Morality is collapsing. Weapons are proliferating. Economies are faltering. Disease is spreading. Hate is rampant. Since what the world really needs is bigger than we could ever comprehend, Jesus' return for us at the end of the age is one of the greatest hopes the Bible teaches.

And He could come back at any time. Advent is kind of like that "check engine" light on our car. If we fail to have it checked out, we're just riding on borrowed time. Well, when it comes to this thing called life, we're all riding on borrowed time, aren't we? So the question is: Will we be ready when Christ returns?

Earlier in Matthew 24, Jesus taught the disciples the **signs** of his return, and in today's Scripture lesson he teaches us **how we need to be ready** for his return.

So when can we expect him? Jesus tells us about that very moment. He's telling us about the end of all things, and when he will return, but there's a catch. He tells us in verse 36: *"No one knows about that day or hour," not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" Jesus can't make it any plainer. So don't be tempted to believe those who set dates for Christ's return! Throughout history many people have done so, and they were all wrong!

When I read those words, *"No one knows about that day or hour..."*, I couldn't help but remember the day and hour one time which I certainly didn't know. On March 9, 1971 at approximately 3:30 a.m., I was greeted by an elbow to the ribs, an elbow belonging to my wife. It was one of those moments that you just don't ever forget. She said something like, *"Sweetie, I think it might be about time."* Yep, the moment had finally arrived. I was ready and I just knew how I thought this would go and how it would end.

At that point, it was nearly time to prepare for my daily 5 a.m. shift. So I hurried to the phone to give my manager a "heads up." And that's when I heard the announcement, *"Go ahead to work. The contractions are not that close."* So off to work I go.

But as soon as I arrived, I was paged to the phone, only to hear, *"Sweetie, I think it's time. We need to go."* Allow me to skip the details and just say the Chevy-turned-emergency vehicle arrived at the front door of Alton Memorial Hospital in just the nick of time. As Janet stepped out of the car, her water broke.

And exactly 27 minutes later, I was greeted by an OB nurse with the announcement, *"You have a beautiful baby and you can see them shortly."*

Now what did I think I know? Well, I just knew it was a boy, but then so did Janet. As I entered the room, she exclaimed, *"It's another girl!"* As it turns out, we waited for 9 months to learn that we really knew absolutely nothing.

Today Jesus tells us about his coming, and even though when that will happen is unknown to us, he wants us to live with the assurance that he IS coming.

And He compares the days of Noah before the flood to those preceding the return of Christ saying, *"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away."*

We've all heard the phrase that history repeats itself. Jesus says when he returns it will be similar to the days of Noah when people were living their lives on cruise control, not paying attention to anything but their own lives, until the flood came and swept them all away.

And as we look around our world today, it's not so hard to believe that many of us are living on cruise control. We may be so busy getting ready for the holidays, for example, that we're forgetting to get ready for Christ. So today Jesus offers us our annual wake-up call, our reminder to get ready, not just for Christmas, but for his return. That, in a nutshell, is what the Advent Season is all about!

Then Jesus goes on to say that some will be taken and others left in verses 40-41: *"Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left."*

The point is, when Christ returns, God will make a distinction between those who are ready and those who aren't ready. And Jesus shows us just how personal this will be. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be sitting across from each other grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

The singer, Larry Norman, wrote a song about these verses called, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." He paraphrases the verses this way: *"A man and wife asleep in bed, she hears a noise and turns her head; he's gone. I wish we'd all been ready. Two men walking up a hill, one disappears, and one's left standing still. I wish we'd all been ready. There's no time to change your mind, the Son has come, and you've been left behind."*

That's the first teaching from our passage this morning: not everyone will be ready when Christ returns. And the next teaching follows logically from the first. Make sure that we are ready!

There are basically two things Jesus tells us here. First, keep watch, because we don't know when! Look at verse 42: *"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."* But how often do we really think about Christ's return? Do we wake up each morning and say, *"It could be today!"*

Jesus then says to be prepared, because he will come like a thief in the night with no warning and no alarm system, and a complete shock to everyone in the house. Look at verses 43-44: *"But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."*

You might say that a thief in the night is something completely unexpected. If we knew when the thief was coming, if he called us up and made an appointment, or we somehow overheard his plans in advance, we would not be caught sleeping, would we? No, we would be prepared. Maybe we would be armed or have law enforcement present. In exactly the same way, we need to be prepared for Christ's return, because he tells us that he will come at a time when we don't expect him.

"Keep your eye on the ball!" and *"Get your head in the game!"* are phrases often shouted by baseball coaches to their players. These and other similar sayings have the same purpose – to keep drowsy players from being lulled into complacency. Jesus certainly endorses that goal from a spiritual perspective here.

And also notice that Jesus isn't telling us this to comfort us but to warn us, and to wake us up, just as the story of Noah once did. Just like Noah before us, we're getting ready for something. We're getting ready for Christmas, of course, but what we're really getting ready for is the final coming of the Son of Man.

But unlike Noah's flood, however, Jesus' return is nothing to fear, but something to eagerly anticipate, and to look forward to with joy. We're waiting for a flood, in a way, but a wonderful flood, of forgiveness and grace and mercy and love.

God flooded the earth to rid the world of a sinful generation, but he also provided a lifesaving ark, known as the church, to all who would enter the open door. We have the same mission as Noah, saved by faith in Christ, we are to relay God's open-door invitation to the world: *"Come to Jesus, for he is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the door."*

The doctrines of Christ's death and resurrection teach us the foundation for our salvation. But the doctrine of Christ's return teaches us the foundation for godly living. And knowing that Christ is coming **should** profoundly affect our behavior.

So just how should we live knowing that Christ could return at any moment? Above all else, we need to know Jesus and trust him as our Savior. **Now** is the time of grace and opportunity when the gospel call goes forth and all who put their faith in Jesus are saved. When He returns, that window will close.

Secondly, we need to recognize the signs – false teachers, wars and rumor of wars, natural disasters such as earthquakes, famines and pandemics. You might say that the check engine light is blinking because the signs are all around us.

Thirdly, we need to live obediently as faithful and wise servants of Christ **every day** as though Jesus is returning today. As mentioned earlier, we're all riding on borrowed time. We don't want to be like the people in Noah's day who carried on their lives as though nothing would ever change. We don't want to be like the person who was caught unexpectedly by the thief in the night. The flood hasn't yet arrived, so we don't want to wait until it's too late.

Sadly, our hurry-up culture short-circuits the Advent season of hope. We are tempted to go directly to celebrating Christmas without getting in touch with the part of ourselves that is longing, hoping and trusting.

We should remember that as we give and receive gifts this Christmas Season that salvation is a **free** gift. The hope of our life will never come wrapped in paper and placed under a tree. The gift of life was wrapped in swaddling clothes, placed in a manger, and would later hang on a different type of tree.

The story is told of an older man who stopped a young man in the park and asked him what he was looking for in life. The young man said he was looking forward to graduating from high school later that year. *"Excellent,"* said the older man. *"And then what?"* *"Then I plan to go to college and get a degree."* *"That sounds good,"* said the older man. *"And then what?"* *"Well, then I plan to get a good job, find a nice woman, get married, have children, and settle down."* *"Okay,"* said the older man, *"and then what?"* *"Well, after raising a family, I would really like to retire early, maybe do some traveling, see the country."* *"Very good,"* said the older man. *"And then what?"* *"Well, I guess eventually I would come to the end of a full and busy life, and then I would die."* *"That's right,"* said the older man. *"And then what?"*

There's many good and worthy goals that we can pursue while in this life, but unless we're looking for something beyond this life, they will all perish with time. Paul tells Timothy that if there's one thing we should be looking for that affects everything else we do, we should be looking for Christ's appearing.

We don't know WHEN that will be, but, **READY OR NOT**, we all have an appointment with God someday. And we'd better be ready for it! AMEN.