

**The First Sunday of Advent**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas**  
**30 November 2025**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

As I wrote in my blog this last week, today we begin Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary, a year in which we will be reading from the Gospel of Matthew. I said that Matthew takes 90% of the Gospel of Mark and introduces five unique sermons at various places: a. 5:1-7:29, b. 9:36-11:1, c. 13:1-52, d. 18:1-35. And e. 23:1-25:46. Today's passage comes from the middle of the last sermon of Matthew, also known as *The Judgment Discourse*.

To fully understand our passage in context, let us review briefly the entire judgement discourse. In Chapter 23. We see two main sections: the woes of judgement against the scribes and Pharisees and the lament over Jerusalem. Let me paraphrase the judgement against the scribes and Pharisees: "They do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They lock people out of the kingdom of heaven, and themselves refuse to enter it. They are like blind guides more concerned with the gold of the sanctuary than with the sanctuary itself. They are proud of their tithes but neglect justice, mercy, faith, and the needy among them. They are worried about cleansing rituals and the exterior appearance of cups and plates but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. They are like whitewashed tombs, clean and white on the exterior but filled with decaying bones in the interior. And they are like their ancestors who kill and crucify the prophets, sages, and scribes sent to them by God." The second section of chapter 23 is Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate."

In chapter 24, The destruction of the temple is foretold at the Mount of Olives (in Luke this happens at the Temple itself). Jesus says, "not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." After this, Jesus describes the signs of the end, "you will hear of wars and rumors of wars... kingdom will rise against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs." He also announces the persecution that will befall the disciples and the advent of false prophets, "They will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated ... because of my name... And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray." But it is not until the Desolating Sacrilege announced by Daniel arrives that the Son of Man

will return. In Daniel, this sacrilege is the introduction of pagan gods within the Temple of the Lord, which may include a statute of the emperor, placed where only God should be worshiped. It is then that “They will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory.” This will be a time of judgement for the world and vindication for the elect.

The chapter ends with several parables encouraging watchfulness, full engagement in the work of the kingdom, and preparation for the coming Son of Man, who will come as a thief in the night (The Fig Tree, Watchfulness, and the Faithful and Unfaithful Slave). Lastly, in Chapter 25 we see the parables of the “Ten Bridesmaids, Talents, and the Judgment of the Nations.” The entire discourse ends at 25:46. We know this because the next line starts, “When Jesus had finished saying all these things...” (26:1).

So, the passage for today comes from chapter 24:36-44, and it is part of the fifth sermon Matthew introduces into the narrative of Mark. The disciples want to know when the end will come, so they may be prepared. Jesus said to them, “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” He then uses an illustration from the story of Noah in Genesis to help them understand. During the days of Noah, people kept leading their lives as though their progress and excess would last forever, completely ignorant of the fact that God had already judged their generation and a flood was soon coming. That generation was forced to pay the consequences of their apathy and disregard for God’s commands. They were held to account for their arrogance and their inhumanity towards the needy, the orphans, the widows, and the alien among them. Their over-confidence in their own progress was shattered (they built a tower tall enough to reach God, perhaps with the intent of taking over God’s realm).

It will be just like that when the end comes, Jesus says. People will continue to do what they have always done, “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,” while completely ignorant of the fact that judgement is coming and nothing will ever be the same again. The most devastating tragedies in human history have always happened when people were the least prepared for them. It will be like that at the end of days. Disaster will strike and the unprepared will be swept up by the rising tide. Jesus says, “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming... for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” To keep awake is to be busy and vigilant until Messiah returns.

I don’t know about you, but it is hard to talk about and to preach judgement and the end of days when we are surrounded by the happy, jolly tunes of Christmas in every radio station, television channel, and social media outlet. Today, we

should be talking about a rosy, plumb, beautiful newborn baby who reminds us of everything that is good and noble and worthy of praise. We should be talking about gifts and gift-wrapping, special meals, new clothes and Christmas decorations like trees and wreaths with angels and ornaments hanging from their branches. Instead, Matthew wants us to see the coming of Messiah from the vantage point of his imminent return at the end of days. Perhaps the best way to prepare for Jesus' birth is to prepare for his final return, to be reminded of the days of Noah, and to be called to action and work in God's kingdom.

For Matthew, we do not await passively the birth of Jesus or his last return at the end of days. There must be a constant preparing of the way, a cleansing baptism of repentance that takes place before we welcome the newborn and the returned King of kings and Lord of lords. There must be a Fall cleaning of all the baggage we have accumulated all year round: The extra weight of resentments and bitterness, the apathy that comes from feeling too small in the face of so much pain in the world, the hopelessness that comes from thinking our best years are behind us, the fears that start small and grow to occupy more and more real estate in our brains and in our hearts, our isolation from God and our communities of faith, our small thinking and prejudices against others who differ from us, our propensity for denial and rationalizations in the face of our sin, and our lack of imagination and faith. There must be a call to repentance and an act of confession.

Today, as we begin the Season of Advent, I invite all of us to approach our Messiah with confidence. Place at the foot of the cross all the baggage of your life and promise yourself to be more present in the act of living. For those who believe in Christ, his return is good news. It means that our vindication is near. One day we will stand before the Lord and we will see him as a friend and not as a stranger. Until then, let us remain alert and busy. There is much work to be done to prepare for his coming.

May God continue to bless us as we wait. Amen!