

**Rom. 13:11** Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup> let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**Matt. 24:36** "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup> But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

November 27, 2016  
First Sunday in Advent

### What Are You Waiting For?

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

The question our scripture readings ask us this morning is: what are you waiting for? Here's a hint: the answer should not be "Christmas".

Leave it to God to interrupt our short-term plans with his long-term vision. Here we are, just hardly finished cleaning up Thanksgiving's dishes and barely begun making shopping lists and party plans for the next four weeks' hectic schedule, and God stops us and says, "Let me give you the big picture. Let me tell you about an Advent that will knock your socks off and blow your candles out. Jesus is coming back, and it won't be on a silent night. Instead of a star in the east, the stars are going to fall from the sky, the sun will go dark, and the moon will disappear."

Just when we want to narrow our focus on the next few weeks, God shows up and wants us to broaden our focus on the big picture.

Just when we want to look back at Jesus' first coming, Jesus wants us to look forward to his second coming.

And it isn't something we really want to do. Think about it. Which do you prefer to imagine: a peaceful starlit night with shepherds watching over their flocks, or stars chaotically falling from the sky and people suddenly disappearing out in the fields? A sweet little baby in a manger with farm animals silently watching over him, or a mighty judge descending from the heavens while the earth quakes and the sun goes dark?

I mean, angels showing up in people's bedrooms and filling shepherds' skies with strains of "Glory to God" is scary enough. Heavenly bodies falling from the sky and Jerusalem temples being toppled to the ground is just more than we want to handle right now. Just give me a little snow, a tree covered with lights, a nice fire in the fireplace, and I'm good.

The great twentieth century theologian, Ricky Bobby, in that classic Christmas movie, *Talladega Nights*, keeps wanting to pray to "Lord baby Jesus." His wife reminds him that Jesus did grow up, so Ricky doesn't have to call him "baby Jesus." Ricky replies, "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace." He may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but he has us pegged on that point. We'd much prefer the Christmas Jesus of Matthew 2 to the apocalyptic Jesus of Matthew 24.

But the truth is that both pictures are of the same Jesus – a baby lying in a manger and the Son of Man descending on a cloud, and we would do well to be prepared not just to celebrate his birth two thousand years ago, but also his return at an unexpected hour. One thing we *don't* want is to be caught staring at our iPhone or watching a football game when it happens.

What is not usually understood in these passages is what God's work of salvation is that will be completed at Christ's return. In Romans 13, Paul has an interesting phrase we may not always catch. He says that "*salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.*" The thing we most often misunderstand about Jesus' work of salvation is that it is not simply about getting people into heaven when they die. Let me repeat that: the salvation begun in Christ's coming and to be completed at Christ's return is NOT simply getting people into heaven when they die.

Christmas is a Cosmic event. It is cosmic. There really isn't any other way to look at it if you believe that the birth of Jesus is God's becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The big picture is that this was the beginning of the creation being transformed. In the meantime, Jesus' coming – his birth, death and resurrection – has enabled us to go to heaven when we die, but when he returns, he will bring heaven with him and will do away with sin and death; with greed and evil and all that keeps this world from being heaven.

That is the big picture of which we are to be reminded before we get ultra-focused on this Christmas, these shopping lists, those grocery lists, that office party, and being sure that all the kids get the same amount of gifts. There is something larger going on here than even the balance on our credit card bill on December 26<sup>th</sup>. Jesus is coming back, and he's bringing heaven with him. It won't be an easy transition, but it will be a complete overhaul of cosmic proportions.

I've mentioned before that I get a daily email that talks about an event that happened on each day in North Carolina's history. This morning's was too perfect not to share. On this day in 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a speech in Rocky Mount. Before a crowd of nearly 2,000 in the gymnasium at Booker T. Washington High School, King used a number of expressions that made their way into his

landmark “I Have a Dream” address at the Lincoln Memorial, which was part of the March on Washington nine months later in August 1963.

Near the close he built toward these lines: “I have a dream that one day right here in Rocky Mount, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will meet at the table of brotherhood, knowing that one God brought man to the face of the Earth. I have a dream tonight that one day my little daughter and my two sons will grow up in a world not conscious of the color of their skin, but only conscious of the fact that they are members of the human race. . . .”

That famous dream caught our imaginations and stirred our souls because it is also the dream of our Lord Jesus Christ. He came into the world with the same dream of all people living together in peace and harmony with no distinctions of race or color or politics or class, only conscious of the fact that we are all members of the human race, we are all children of a loving God, all brothers and sisters of a Lord who came once in the form of a baby in a manger, and who will return to usher in the dream he spoke so powerfully through his prophet, Martin.

This is truly what we are waiting for – not just Christmas day, but the final day when all things will be made new. And, the crucial point is, the thing you wait for determines what you do while you wait. If Advent and Christmas are for us something in the past that we remember each December, then our preparations will simply be repeating the same traditions of the past.

But if Advent and Christmas not only look to the past, but also to the future when the big picture, the ultimate goal, the beautiful dream is fulfilled, then we wait for that in a different way. We wait with peace, and hope, and joy, and love. We wait by working for justice and unity and equality and freedom. If the day is coming when the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord, then we wait for it by living into it, living by those features that make the most difference. Because that world is coming, and we do not know when.

What we are waiting for determines what we do while we wait.

So, what are you waiting for?