

Unexpected Blessings

A sermon at Holy Eucharist on Advent 1, 2025

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Matthew 24:36-44

'Yet about that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son; no one but the Father alone. 'As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be when the Son of Man comes. In the days before the flood they ate and drank and married, until the day that Noah went into the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man comes. Then there will be two men in the field: one will be taken, the other left; two women grinding at the mill: one will be taken, the other left. 'Keep awake, then, for you do not know on what day your Lord will come. Remember, if the householder had known at what time of night the burglar was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. Hold yourselves ready, therefore, because the Son of Man will come at the time you least expect him.

Advent is a season of preparation. Preparing for Christmas celebrations, of course, but also preparing ourselves for the second coming of Christ. As is so often the case for Christians, we live in two places at once. We are citizens of this world, but our true citizenship is in heaven.¹ We are made in the beautiful image and likeness of God,² but we see a world marred by sin. We know the kingdom of God is at hand,³ but we still struggle against the corrupting powers of this world.

In Advent, we are reminded that we have been saved, are saved, and will be saved, and that all are true at once. We look forward to Christmas, our annual celebration of the first coming of Christ into our midst. We tell the stories of Bethlehem, the ox and ass in the stable, the full inn, and so on. We gather with loved ones, send cards, prepare special foods, and in so many other ways set the season aside as something unlike any other time of year. So great is our joy at what God did in sending the Son to us in this way.

But, as today's passage from Matthew's telling of the gospel reminds us, Jesus promised that, after leaving, he would return. And he second coming would herald the Last Day, the end of time. Today's passage is taken from a discussion just before Jesus' trial and execution, so the tension is high, time is short, and the conversation is heavy.

Of course, when Jesus announces that there will be a day of judgement, everyone listening wants to know when this day will come. We can imagine the frustration when Jesus says that nobody, not even he, knows the day or the hour when this will happen. It is a frustrating passage

¹Philippians 3:20

²Genesis 1:27

³Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:15

for us, too. We would also like to know when the Last Day is to happen so that we can ensure we are ready.

This passage was embarrassing to early Christians. After all, their critics said, if Jesus is really God, how is there anything that he cannot know? A god who cannot know the day that he has scheduled for the end of time? And a god who sneaks around like a thief in the night? Doesn't sound like much of a deity at all, does it?

Setting aside the detractors, what are we to make of this statement? Why would God not want to share with us the timeline for the great working out of salvation? For all of our discomfort with uncertainty and the unknown, perhaps withholding this information from us is, in fact, a mercy rather than a cruelty or an indifference.

The first coming of Christ was unexpected. Not that it happened. God's prophets had been speaking for generations about the arrival of a Messiah. The people of Israel were anxious for someone to change their fortunes. Their kingdom had fallen from its past glory. They had become a backwater province of the Roman Empire. Far from the status that the chosen people of God should hold.

Of course, when Christ appeared, it was not what was expected. For many, it was not what they hoped for, either. A tiny baby, born to an unwed mother with a simple carpenter as an adoptive father. Jesus proved not to be a powerful military leader who would rout the Romans. Nor would he be a politician, claiming his ancestor David's throne for himself. No, he would be a healer, teacher, and rabbi. Speaking to people across the land about the coming kingdom of God and the new covenant that God was working out for them. If the first coming of Christ

could be so unlike what people expected, why should we be any better informed about the second?

Perhaps it is the case that, by not giving us a definite time and date for the day of judgement, God is exercising mercy. Perhaps the coming of the Last Day is not set, but will happen when God decides that we, beloved creatures made in the divine image, are ready for it. By refusing to give us a deadline, God can continually show forth mercy and grace by extending and extending the cutoff until the time is right. Or perhaps it is that God knows, were we to have a deadline, we would live to the deadline. The project due on Friday doesn't really need to be started until Thursday evening, does it? This may work for some middle school assignments, but it is not the way that we grow well in faith. Our relationship with God, like any relationship, takes time to grow and develop into its fullness.

Instead, by refusing to give us a day and time, God encourages us to live each day, even each hour, as though it is the last one. I remember joining a Muslim student group for iftar during Ramadan and hearing the leader of the prayers say, as they were lining up, "Stand foot-to-foot, shoulder-to-shoulder, and pray this prayer as if it were your last." I found myself pleased to think that somewhere, deep in our Abrahamic heritage, we shared this sense of urgency about our relationship with God. We know not when the kingdom of God will erupt in its fullness or when our judgement will come, so each hour must be lived as though it were the final one given to us.

When that great day does come, we long to be found watching and waiting in prayer. We light the candles of our Advent wreaths every evening to remind ourselves that, even in the dark of night, we are called to be watchful. Even

in the busy hours of a season of preparation like Advent, we are called to set aside time to watch and pray, scanning the horizon for rays of the new dawn breaking over us. God's unwillingness to share all of the details with us may leave us uncomfortable, frustrated, or even embarrassed. It is a good reminder that we are called to be a prayerful people of faith, not a people of certainty. And, as Saint Paul reminds us, God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God.⁴

Trust in God. Remain faithful. Be steadfast in prayer. Watch for the return of Christ. May this Advent season be one of many unexpected blessings.

⁴Romans 8:28