

“Heads Up”

Text: Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

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Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Matthew 24:42

A friend of mine likes to tell the story of two young fellows who were fast friends. They did everything together, went to school together, and played together. One Sunday they decided to go to church together. One of the boys was Catholic, the other Presbyterian. First they went to the early Mass at the Catholic Church. Much of what the Presbyterian boy saw was familiar to him. But he was surprised when the priest knelt and bowed low and kissed the altar. “What does that mean?” he whispered to his friend. His friend explained that the priest was simply showing reverence for Christ.

At 11 o’clock, the boys attended the worship service at the Presbyterian Church. The liturgy was for the most part self-explanatory, and the Catholic boy had no problem understanding what was happening until the preacher stood up to preach his sermon. With great flourish, he took off his wristwatch and laid it to one side of the pulpit. “What does that mean?” the Catholic boy asked.

“Believe me, it doesn’t mean a thing in this world!” answered the Presbyterian.

In this Presbyterian Church, we preachers rely on the clock that hangs just below the balcony to tell us what time it is, and we strive mightily to stay within an appropriate time frame, which is what you expect us to do. My husband frequently reminds me that no souls are saved after the first 20 or 25 minutes!

In the mid-1990s I had the opportunity to go with a group of pastors and seminary professors to China, where we had a wonderful tour of many of the congregations and house churches that are gathering in China. The people in China feel genuinely cheated if the sermon is shorter than an hour and a half. Many have come long distances; some are at risk when they come to worship. They do not mind standing

for hours, listening, singing, and praying. It was very moving to me. It was as if the worshippers had entered into another realm, where there were no seconds or minutes, no yesterday, no tomorrow even, but only the reality of God's kingdom here and now. When the service was over, the Chinese Christians would leave on foot or on bicycle, returning to their homes ready to live more courageously in this world, because they had spent time at the intersection where time and eternity meet, and they had seen a new world coming.

I have told you before about the woman whose husband died, leaving her with scant resources and seven children. The children all grew up and went to college and lived productive lives. When she was asked how she'd been able to find the strength to make the sacrifices that she had made, she answered, "I saw a new world coming."

Our readings from the New Testament this first Sunday of Advent have to do with the new world that God has promised. Today we begin to prepare for the birth of the baby in Bethlehem, and when he comes, the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets will have come to pass. What is so interesting about the assigned Bible passages from the lectionary is that neither has a word to say about the baby Jesus, about the first Advent of what the Bible calls the Son of Man. They are only concerned about the Second Coming, the promise that one day Christ will return as judge and ruler over all things, and that this crazy, crooked world will be set straight again at last.

Mary's baby was the fulfillment of the promises of ancient times, but Mary's baby himself is the promise of something more, of a new day, of a new heaven and a new earth, when finally, there will be no more crying or tears or pain for all the former things will have passed away, and everything will be made new. (Revelation 21)

The baby is the promise of something more. (1) In Paul's letter to the Romans, he calls the "something more" salvation. He says, "Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers." Closer and closer it comes – this culmination of all God's actions on the side of justice and grace and redemption. (2)

We certainly wouldn't want to miss the culmination of history, would we? Then again, maybe we would, particularly when you hear Matthew's version of it. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "When I come again it will be as it was in the days of Noah, when people were going about their affairs oblivious to the ways of God, paying no attention. Noah had sense enough to build a boat; the rest of them were swept away."

I think of that Santa Claus song that goes, “He knows when you’ve been sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows when you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness’ sake.” Is that a secular way of saying that it really does matter what we do? God means for us to live in certain ways in this world, according to God’s ways, and there will be a price to be paid if we live our lives indifferent to the new life to which we are called.

Paul makes clear the connection between ethics and eschatology. “The night is far gone, the day is near; let us put aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light and live honorably as in the day,” not indulging every instinct, passion or desire that we have, but live a different kind of way, strengthened by Christ.

I have been reading in recent days a new book by Peter Gomes, “*The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What’s Good about the Good News?*” Gomes reminds us that it is not possible to be Jesus, so forget that deal about WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? That’s irrelevant, because you are not Jesus, and I am not Jesus, and none of us can ever be Jesus. We can only be ourselves. But with God’s help, we can be our best selves, and do the right thing in our own time. This has everything to do with what you decide to put on in the morning, what kind of attitude, what kind of outlook, whether you are able to temper your behavior by taking the long view. “Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.” The world and our lives are held forever in the hands of a gracious God. We can do anything with the grace of Christ within us and the armor of his light surrounding us.

It has been years since I read it, but last week I dug out a brilliant sermon by a Yale Divinity professor named William Muehl. Dr. Muehl wrote, “To tell people, as the church often does, that they are accepted by God no matter what they do may not be good news at all, but bad news. . . the function of redemptive love is not to make the sinner feel better about his past. It is to give him back his future.”(3)

I am not a person who takes all parts of the Bible literally, but I do take the Bible seriously. I do not believe in the future forecast by the best-selling authors of the *Left Behind* series, but I do place my hope in the Biblical promise that the future belongs to God. I do believe that it makes a difference as to whether we act on the good that we know and whether we help our neighbor or whether we don’t; whether we build a boat, choose to do as we please, to live for ourselves with no thought whatsoever as to what might please God.

The frightening images of people being swept away by the flood or lifted up while they’re grinding meal and other bizarre things all appear in the 24th chapter of

Matthew. Do you know what the 25th chapter of Matthew is about? It depicts the final judgment, when Christ has come in glory and sits upon the throne and all the nations of the world will be gathered around him. He will say to those on his right hand, “Come to me, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom, for when I was a stranger you welcomed me; when I was hungry you gave me food, and when I was sick, you cared for me.”

“When did we do that?” the righteous will ask.

Jesus will answer, “Truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did it to me.”

Here’s the deal. At the end of time, we will be judged by whether we have dignified human life or whether we have denigrated it by indifference. Paul writes, “You know what time it is. Now is the moment to be awake, for the day of Christ is fast approaching.”

Mark Twain once remarked, “It’s not what I don’t understand in the Bible that troubles me. It is what is perfectly clear that does.”

“Wake up!” Jesus said. “No one knows when my return will be, only the Father knows.” In other words, everything happens, particularly the end of time, in God’s own good time. The earliest followers of the Christian movement believed the Second Coming would happen any day. But years passed, then decades, and now centuries have passed, and nothing. But no, that’s wrong; I know it’s wrong when I say it. The end of history has not come, but we get glimpses and foretastes of God’s future all the time, not the full glory of the risen Savior, but rays of hope breaking through the darkness of this world. They are enough to keep us living in hope.

Al and I have a Chicago friend, a Polish Catholic, whose conversation often includes the word, “HELLO!” meaning, “Don’t you get it?”

I think this is what Jesus was saying to those who loved him, and who want to follow his way today. “HELLO! Don’t you get it? This is your Father’s world.” God created the world. God loves the world, and God will make the world whole again before it’s all over. That ought to keep you from ever being overwhelmed with the trials of this present moment. That ought to keep you from timidly standing back from the sufferings of others, the places where you can put your energies, and make a real difference. I think of how it was on the night before he was killed, Martin Luther King, Jr. said he had been to the mountaintop and had seen the Promised Land.

Sensing his own end, Dr. King was declaring that “short-term trauma is nothing compared to long-termed glory.” It’s all in your perspective. It’s all in knowing in whose hands the future lies.

Think about this. What if tomorrow were going to be the last day of your life and somehow you knew it? How would you live today? What would you not do? What would you do? Think about it. Today is, after all, the only day we know for sure any of us will have.

I have mentioned before the wonderful Atlanta friends of mine and many of you who were killed in a plane crash in 2003. The Christmas before the crash, they gave to their friends a framed copy of a 2,000 year old Sanskrit poem. These are some of the words:

Yesterday is but a memory, and tomorrow is but a vision,
But today well-lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day.

As a servant of our Savior Jesus Christ, I urge you to look well to this day, for this day is alive with the light of Christ and the in-breaking of God’s everlasting kingdom. Thanks be to God.

(1) *Texts for Preaching*, Bruggemann, Cousar, etc. Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

(2) Ibid.

(3) *All the Damned Angels*, William Muehl, Pilgrim Press, 1972.

(4) *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter J. Gomes, HarperOne, 2007.