

## **“Limited Knowledge, Boundless Hope”**

**Matthew 24: 36-44**

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A colleague of mine once said that he feels that hope is an overrated sentiment. His logic was this: if we're always focusing on our hopes, we are not grounded enough in the present. We're not believing strongly enough that things can be better **now**. Hope gives us an excuse not to **do** anything now. It was his view that hope provides the ultimate justification for procrastination on all that really matters!

Our scriptures for today have a very different view of hope, particularly hope that is intertwined with a robust faith in God. In every one of these readings, hope for the future powerfully influences how the present is to be lived and embraced. Now, at first glance, we might say, “Wait a minute; this Gospel reading sounds more scary than hopeful. What’s this apocalyptic stuff doing in the lectionary on the first Sunday in Advent?” It is true that very first Sunday of Advent we are all more or less hoping for angels and shepherds and stars, and yet the lectionary serves up rather mystifying sayings of Jesus related to what are sometimes called “the end times.” Almost every preacher I know is tempted to put a different gospel lesson into their bulletin on this Sunday, including me! But here it is, with its disturbing images of flood and kidnapper and thief. How on earth do we find hope in this?

All of us have probably had the experience of driving behind a car with the bumper sticker that says, “In case of the rapture, this car will be moving without a driver.” While we all must remain humble before the vast mystery of our God, this sort of bumper sticker, it seems to me, misses the whole point of Matthew’s words. It does appear that among the early followers of Jesus, there was an expectation of an end to history, at which time Jesus would return in bodily form to redeem the world. Indeed, we can see in Paul’s letters some of the ways that various followers of Jesus coped with the fact that it hadn’t happened yet, along with thoughts on what believers ought to be doing in the meantime. Certainly a conversation about all the different theories of if, how, and when these end times will or will not arrive could fill hours of our time. As with much of scripture, though, getting mired in the particulars often causes us to miss the forest for the trees. There are wondrous and hopeful treasures to find in these puzzling passages. We will find together this morning that there are even ADVENT treasures to unwrap in these strange, apocalyptic sayings!

Life is full of little and big apocalypses, is it not? Many of us here have experienced the personal apocalypse of serious illness, which, like the flood or the kidnapper or the thief, can come at any time. When this happens, our former times pass away, and a new time is ushered in. All that is truly important comes into clear view; each moment becomes precious and infused with many layers of meaning. In thinking about this, I remembered a woman that my husband Bob and I met on Bob’s first day of chemotherapy. As many of you can understand from your own experiences, we were traumatized by his diagnosis, and daunted by the ruggedness of the treatment ahead. Mostly, we were terrified that he wouldn’t survive very long. Life as we had known it was over, and a whole new road lay ahead, one we decidedly did not want to travel. We were overwhelmed. Luckily, a great blessing awaited us that day. Her name was Susie.

Susie was a woman in her forties who was receiving chemotherapy that day, too. Seated in the chair next to Bob's, she smiled at us and greeted us warmly as we came in. She asked Bob about his situation, and we asked about hers. Susie had metastatic cancer. It had traveled from its primary site to her brain and her lungs. From under her wig she told us that she knew she would be receiving chemo the rest of her life, and that, in her case, the goal was not a realistically a cure, but simply to keep the cancer at bay for as long as possible. She expected her life would be considerably shortened by her disease. What struck me about her was how cheerful she was, and how positively she presented herself. Most endearing and wonderful was the way in which she launched into her truly useful suggestions about how to manage the effects of receiving chemo. She showed us her zip-lock bags of fresh fruit she had packed for the day, offering to share. She said to Bob forcefully, "You must eat. You won't feel like it, but you must!" She had never even met us, but she exuded care and concern. She made us both feel so at ease, and she inspired us, as well. She helped us trust that this new road was a beginning as much as it was an end, that this complete shake-up of our lives was an opportunity to re-order our priorities, and, perhaps most importantly, that the embrace of HOPE was a critical ingredient in being able to walk this new road. I often wonder what has happened to Susie; we never saw her again. I hope she is alive and well and laughing and still enjoying slices of fresh cantaloupe. She was an angel to us that day; she was a living parable; she was the face of Christ himself.

You never do know when a flood will hit, or when a thief will disrupt your life. Jesus' saying all this is certainly mysterious and puzzling in some respects, and as we try to understand it, we do run right up against the limits of our knowledge in the face of divine mystery. Yet in some ways, this talk of unexpected endings only affirms what we already know about ourselves and our world: we are mortal, and that the need for change in the world is always urgent. There will be an end to our own histories, though we don't know when. We don't like this idea of endings, of apocalypses, of upheaval. We tend to think of the word "apocalypse" as being synonymous with "disaster." In fact, it surprises us to know that it comes from the Greek *apokalypsis*, which actually means to "uncover." When we face the mystery of **our** end, or of **the** end, that which is most precious in life is "uncovered." Perspective and purpose are restored. Our troubling text for today reminds us of this. It also jolts us into remembering that God's plans are free of ours—thank goodness. God's plans are not, in the end, subject to human limitations. God's presence is not always subtle. We as individuals, and the church, as a collectivity, are called to keep awake to our true purposes in this hurting world, and the time for healing action is always now.

Those holiday catalogues clogging our mailboxes tauntingly tell us "there is still time!" But as people of faith, our hope lies NOT in whether there is still time left to shop for the holidays, an activity which has definitely been raised to absurd heights in our culture! Time, dear friends, is blessedly, wondrously in the hands of God. This Advent is the time to make these mortal bodies of ours a dwelling place for the baby Jesus. Prepare, for he will come in. Prepare for the uncovering of all that is precious and dear. Prepare for a hope so astonishing, so boundless, that you may never be the same. Amen.