

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/27/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

First Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, November 27th

Matthew 24:36-44

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Christ will come again

This is the first Sunday of the Christian year. The lectionary now cycles around again to Year A and we transition from Luke to Matthew. The first Sunday in Advent always has an apocalyptic Gospel reading which anticipates the Second Coming of Christ. This may seem out of place at a time when we prepare to celebrate and remember the birth of our Savior at Christmas. For many, apocalyptic themes can be frightening, difficult to understand, or considered not to be relevant. But the message of Christ's return is a message of hope and the vision which sustains our walk as disciples. Such a vision gives our lives meaning and purpose.

Matthew 24:36-44 Commentary

This week's Gospel lection is situated in the middle of the apocalyptic section of Matthew (24:1 to 25:46). This section is also the fifth and final discourse of Jesus, also known as the Olivet Discourse. It begins with Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple and the disciples asking when this will happen and what the signs will be (24:1-3). Jesus responds by giving signs of the end of the age (24:4-8), the foretelling of persecutions (24:9-14), the telling of the abomination of desolation prophesied by Daniel 9:27 (24:15-28), predicting celestial signs and the coming of the Son of Man (24:29-31), and telling the lesson of the fig tree (24:32-35). The Gospel lection begins at this point and is followed by three parables that relate: The Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants (24:45-51), the Parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1-13), and the Parable of the Talents (25:14-30). This discourse closes with the final judgment (25:31-36) in which the people are separated into two categories - the sheep who helped the "least of these" and the goats who did not. The sheep experience eternal life whereas the goats experience eternal punishment.

The consistent theme running through this apocalyptic discourse is the need to be prepared for the coming of the master. Those who are prepared will receive great blessings; those who are not will be cursed.

In response to the question "*when will these things be?*" back in v. 3, Jesus responds:

³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

This verse is clear: The Father alone knows the timing of these events. So much for all those people who make a career out of predicting the Second Coming! Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. It is also important to

note that Jesus is speaking here from His human nature. As He became incarnate and emptied Himself, He had to learn things like everyone else (Luke 2:52). This knowledge was not available to His human nature.

³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.

This is a comparison between the Great Flood and Jesus' Second Coming. Just as with the flood, with the exception of Noah and his family, nobody knew what was happening. By the time the event began it was too late to do anything about it. Things went on as normal right up until the event happened. There was no warning. So too with the Second Coming. Only those living by faith will be prepared.

The results of the flood are used to illustrate the notion of being swept away. Verses 40-41 illustrate how some will be taken and others will not. This illustrates how believers and non-believers will exist until the final judgment. The word rendered as "taken" in vv. 41 and 42 (*paralambanetai*) implies being taken to be with someone and thus points to the salvation of the person being taken.

⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Jesus then exhorts His disciples (then and now) to stay alert, to live life in a state of spiritual preparedness. Like the master of a house who never knows when a thief might come, we must also be ready since the Son of Man's return will be as unpredictable and unexpected as a thief coming in the night.

Reflections

As we begin to prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate Christmas, the First Coming of Jesus, this First Sunday of Advent invites us to look further ahead to the end of salvation history and look forward to the Second Coming of Jesus with eager expectation and joy. We know from this text:

- (1) Christ will return.
- (2) His coming will be sudden and unexpected.
- (3) It will be a time of separation and judgment. He will gather His own.
- (4) We must live in a state of spiritual readiness.

As disciples we know the end of the story - No matter what happens in our world, we have the surety of God's promise that Christ will come again and restore creation. Until then, we live in faithful discipleship - we love and worship God; and we love and serve our neighbors. To the extent that we long for Christ's return is a measure of our spiritual condition and a measure by which we see the world as it really is - in bondage to sin and rebellion against God. The hope we have is not just a personal one. The church is a community of hope in our fallen world, and we are called to be the hope and share the hope with others. *Maranatha!*

Application

Advent begins with a vision of the end - A vision of what our salvation will look like. It is such a vision which gives our lives purpose and meaning. Our understanding of the Second Advent is the equivalent of our "I have a dream" that unites and aligns us. Such a vision inspires action in the present and sustains us in times of difficulty. Yet

Christians today have differing understandings of what the end will look like. Some question whether Christ will even return at all. Some no longer talk about Christ's Second Coming since it inevitably brings up issues of judgment and thus the risk of being labeled "a hater." Nobody today, especially among Millennial and Gen Z Christians, wants to be known as one of "those" Christians, the hellfire and brimstone type who are known more for what stand against than for than for what they stand for. Judgment today is only popular when used to virtue signal and condemn those who are considered intolerant. There are also many Christians today who are perhaps too comfortable in the world. Perhaps they would rather Jesus not hurry back until they have had their full of worldly pleasures as though our present existence is the maximal human experience. What does this worldview reveal about their beliefs about eternal life?

The vision we hold of Christ's return and how we live our lives in the present are thus inexorably linked. The hope we have in the present is therefore directly related to our understanding of Christ's return, even if we are no longer living when this event occurs.

What is your vision of what happens when Christ returns?

How do you live out this vision in your daily life?

What does it mean to wait in hope?

How do you differentiate between situations where you must wait on God and where God wants you to act now?



For feedback or to be added or removed from the mailing list, please e-mail david.r.lyons@gmail.com