

Advent 1 - Matthew 24: 36-44

At the foot of scarred Mount St Helens lies a lake filled with bleached, water-soaked logs. Called Spirit Lake, it was for many years a popular place for vacationers who boated, fished, and swam in its waters. On its shores were several camps and lodges, including one called the Mt. Saint Helens Lodge, owned by a man named Harry R. Truman.

Through the spring of 1980, as geologists and seismologists crawled all over the restless mountain, Mr. Truman was urged, warned, and begged to leave his lodge for safety. He repeatedly refused. The rumbles that he felt was only his own 83-year-old body. The steam and lava were far away and would not block escape. He had hoarded food and water in an old mine shaft behind the lodge. To every entreaty Mr. Truman insisted that there was no great danger, that the mountain was no threat, and that he would not move because he knew better than those who insisted that he go.

Mr. Truman was still in his lodge when the mountain exploded on May 18, 1980. He was never seen again.¹

As we begin Advent, that season in the church year that calls us to be watchful, our Lord's warning about not being caught unawares is a call for us to be ready—to unlike Mr. Truman to be prepared. We know the importance of being prepared. Financial gurus ask us if we are prepared for retirement. Parents pack a diaper bag to be prepared for any need their child may have. Homeowners prepare their houses and

¹Dave Brooks, YSalt

property for winter weather. Many of us will be travelling to visit family and friends, and we know that safety on the road begins with ensuring the car is checked out and repaired if needed. Preparation for the coming Christ is something that has been done for many centuries.

The gospel writer wrote this text in the early 80s of the 1st Century. This was about 50 years after the death of Christ. It is believed that this text was written in the gospel of Matthew because the people were confused and discouraged by Christ's delayed return. In fact, most scholars believe all of the gospels were written for this same purpose.²

The trouble is of course its almost 2000 years later and Jesus is still yet to appear. If we truly look at the world, I'd dare to say that most people aren't waiting any more. Matthew's exhortations may be falling on deaf ears.

Which leads me to focus less on the event of Jesus' return and more on the profound uncertainty of this passage. No one knows when the Lord will come, not even Jesus.

The gospel writer explains to us that when the Son of Man comes, in several cases of pairs, one will be taken with Jesus and the other will be left behind.

Uncertainly, surprise, unexpected events. These at least are things we know something about. So, what if we update the examples Jesus employs just a bit. Two colleagues were working; one was diagnosed with cancer, another not. Two

²David Lose, In the Meantime.

candidates applied for a coveted job; one was chosen, the other not. Two kids were navigating their way through high school; one succumbed to a drug addiction, the other not. Two couples were joined in marriage; one stayed married, the other did not.

Our lives are filled with unexpected, surprising, and life-altering events. And in the midst of all of this, we are invited – actually, commanded – to keep watch for the presence of the God we know in Jesus. This isn't always easy, especially when the unexpected event is tragic. Sometimes you have to wait a while to see where God is at work and that can be painfully hard. Yet the promise throughout Scripture is that God reliably meets us at our point of greatest need and accompanies us even and especially in the most difficult of circumstances.

But as I've already said, watching and waiting are difficult for us, at least as difficult as it was for Jesus' earliest followers. Which is one of the main reasons we come to church on Sunday! That is, straining to see God at work in the ups and downs of our lives, we come to church to hear these words of exhortation and encouragement read once again, and we also come to church to be surrounded by other Christians, some of whom are struggling to see God, and some of whom have recently seen God and can share with us what they've seen.

While I'm not sure this is exactly what Matthew had in mind when he wrote this passage, I do think one of the chief reasons Christians gather is to encourage each other and help each other to see God, especially during dark and difficult times. Keep in mind that's why Matthew and the other Evangelists wrote in the first place! A millennia and a half later, Martin Luther would say something quite similar when he

described the church as the place where you could count on the mutual comfort and consolation of the faithful. And that tradition continues every time we meet.

When we are having difficulty seeing God present in our lives, we can come to church to have help in our waiting and watching. And when we've experienced God's love, we can come to help others. Despite whatever divisions any of our communities may be experiencing we are joined together first by God's promise to come and abide with us and then joined together yet again by God's gift of a community to help us see God keeping that promise.

No one knows when tragedy will strike. Mr. Truman at Mt. Helens didn't and didn't care. No one knows when incredible blessing may occur. No one knows. But we do know this: God is present. Sometimes that's hard to see, and then we need help. Sometimes it's apparent to us, and then we can help others. That's the way the body of Christ worked all those years ago and, at its best, still works today. Amen.