

Ready for the second Advent?

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[0 : 0 0] So, in our family, getting ready to leave the house as a family to go somewhere can sometimes! be difficult. I know we're probably the only ones. But here's how it typically plays out. About 30! minutes out, we start saying, okay, guys, we're gonna leave soon, so everybody make sure you're ready. Of course, what do we hear? We're ready. We're ready to go. We say, okay, good. 15 minutes out. We go around, hey, guys, we're about to leave the house. Everybody make sure you're ready. Get everything together. Make sure you're ready to go. Everybody says, we're ready. We're ready. Leave us alone. Say, okay, great. So, then, of course, what happens when it's time to actually walk out the door? Hey, everybody, we're leaving. Chaos breaks out, right? People are running, trying to find shoes.

They're running, trying to, they want to brush their hair. They're running, trying to find books. They're trying to use the bathroom or get something to drink or get snacks to the car or find the candle. All chaos breaks loose, right? And I wish I could say that it was never my fault, but it's just as much my fault as it is anyone else's. There was one time recently where we all, we got everybody out to the car, and then I realized I forgot the keys. And so, I had to go back in while everybody stood around the car and waited for me to go get the keys. But this has happened so often in our family. It's so hard to get out of the house that our daughter has actually introduced a phrase that we now use regularly. OTDR, which stands for out the door ready. All right, so now, when it's time to leave, we say, are you ready or are you out the door ready? And I would commend this to you. It's a very useful phrase. And it's a, this sort of theme is sort of the question that confronts us this first Sunday of the Advent season. I already said at the beginning of the service that the season of Advent, it's the, it's the first season of the church calendar. And it's really the season, it's the four weeks leading up to Christmas, where we focus on the coming of Christ to the world. And the first

Sunday of Advent in particular is always the time where we remember that there are actually two Advents. There are two comings of Christ. There's the, the, the first time that, that Christ came, Emmanuel, which we celebrate at Christmas. But then there is the promise that we hold on to as Christians, that one day Christ will come again. And so the question is, and the focus of this morning's gathering, our worship really is this. The question is, are we ready? Are we ready for Christ's return? And, and, and, and really are, are we not just ready? Are we out the door ready? If Christ were to come this very moment, would we be prepared for his arrival? And our primary passage that we're going to be focusing on is Matthew chapter 24. We're going to look at a couple of things in this passage. One, what does Jesus teach about this eventual return? What does he tell us it will be like? And then second, how does that shape the way we live here and now? Or should it shape the way we live here and now?

So let's pray, and then we will open God's word together. Our Lord, Heavenly Father, thank you for this first Sunday of Advent, and thank you for raising questions for us to ponder that we might never otherwise consider. Lord, it would be so easy to live our lives, to be so distracted, to be pulled in so many directions, to have so many things occupying and vying for our attention, that we would never pause to ponder the deepest, most fundamental questions, one of which is this question of what does it mean that you came, and what does it mean that you promised to come again? Lord, help us to consider these things. Help your word to shape our hearts for your glory, and we ask this in Jesus' holy name. Amen. So first question we're going to ask is, what does Jesus himself teach about this second coming, his return? And the first thing we see in this passage is Jesus makes this very clear.

He says that his return will be unmistakable. It will be unmistakable. This passage is part of a, let's call it a private seminar, that happens between Jesus and his disciples. It runs all the way through

chapter 24 and all the way through chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel. It's this one long discourse. [4 : 39] It happens on the Mount of Olives, and so we sometimes refer to this as the Olivet Discourse. And Jesus is essentially giving a very long response to some questions raised by his disciples at the very beginning of chapter 24, verse 3, where they ask him about the end of the age and about his return.

When's it going to happen? What's it going to be like? So Jesus answers these questions. And in order to understand Jesus' response, we need to understand something about prophetic writing in the Bible.

Prophetic writing often blends the present, the near future, and then sometimes the distant future. It all gets blended together, and so sometimes Bible scholars refer to this as the two horizons that exist within prophetic writing. There's a near horizon, the kind of here and now, the immediate future, and then there is the distant horizon. And often those can get blended together.

So in the verses leading up to our passage, the section just before our passage, Jesus is focusing on the near horizon. In other words, the time right around when his disciples are living. So he says, in answer to their question, there's going to be a kind of prefiguring of final judgment in the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Now, at the time that Jesus is saying this, it hadn't happened yet. But we know that very soon after, in AD 69 and 70, these events actually did happen. It was a widespread destruction. The temple was demolished.

[6 : 17] So when Jesus says this present generation will not pass away before these things take place, he's most likely referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. So this is a foretaste, a near horizon foretaste of his return. And then after that, he goes on to describe other kinds of distress that are going to follow, right? So there's going to be conflict. There's going to be wars, rumors of wars. There's going to be increasing persecution of Christians. There's going to be widespread deception. There's going to be false teachers. There's going to be people claiming to be Christ returned. And along with all of that distress, Jesus also says, gospel ministry is going to be happening. He says in verse 14, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world as a testimony to all nations. And of course, as we reflect back on the last 2,000 years, these things have been happening over the last 2,000 years, right? We've had wars and rumors of wars.

We've had persecution of Christians. We've had lots of false teaching and people seeking to deceive and mislead God's people. Lots of people claiming to be Christ returned. And along with that, the gospel is being preached to the nations, right? The gospel is going all around the world. Our church supports and prays for and financially supports some of those missionaries who are out spreading the gospel all around the world, right? So all of these things are happening. So all of that is sort of the near horizon focus of Jesus' answer. And then in verse 29, where our passage, he shifts to the far horizon, the distant horizon. And he says this, immediately after the distress of those days, what's been happening over the last 2,000 years, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. Now, understand he's quoting the Old Testament prophets, prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Joel and Daniel, Daniel chapter 7. He probably doesn't actually mean that stars will literally be falling so much as as he's using prophetic imagery to describe major upheaval, right? This may very well refer to major social or political upheaval. People, you know, people who occupied positions of such unquestionable authority that they were like stars, like heavenly bodies being cast down, right? The world being turned upside down, major upheaval happening. And the point is, and the point that is very clear here, even though some of the prophetic imagery can be murky and hard to understand, is that these events are going to be cataclysmic, global, and public. In other words, everyone in the world is going to see these events. Nobody is going to lean over, right? You know, recently there was news that you could go outside in D.C. and you could see the northern lights, right? There was a geomagnetic storm and you could see the northern lights. And I remember we went outside and we kind of looked up in the sky and kind of leaning over, is that it? Or is that just, you know, is that just the city lights? Like what, you know, that's not going to happen when Jesus returns, right? There's, people are not going to be leaning over and saying, is this it? Or is it going to be something else, right?

He said, everybody in the world is going to know. It's going to be unmistakable and it's going to happen. So that's the first thing he says. The second thing that we see in this passage is that Jesus' return is not only going to be unmistakable, it's going to be totally unexpected. It's going to be totally unexpected. Verses 32 to 44, Jesus says in verse 32, now learn this lesson from the fig tree.

As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that the summer is near. Now, for fig trees, there, you know, a lot of the trees in this part of the world are evergreen. Fig trees were a little unique in that they lost their leaves. And the leaves are one of the last things to return before summer would happen. And so right as soon as you would see the little buds forming and then right as soon as you would start to see the leaves, that meant that summer was essentially here. When the leaves start to return on the fig trees, that means that summer is basically here. And so he says, as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know the summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near right at the door.

[10:57] Now, his point is simply to say this. When God says that something is going to happen, friends, it's going to happen. That's his point. When you see the leaves appearing on the fig tree, summer is guaranteed to be right around the corner. In the same way, this present distress we're experiencing guarantees that Christ's return is imminent. That's why Jesus goes on to say, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. He's essentially saying, I'm saying this is going to happen. It's going to happen. And then he says in verse 36, but about that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. In some mysterious way that only Jesus understands, this knowledge is limited even to him. Only the Father knows exactly when this is going to happen. In other words, he's saying to his disciples and to us, this is going to be completely unexpected. We know it's going to happen, but as to when, no one knows. It's going to be impossible to predict. Now, it blows my mind that even though Jesus says very explicitly that no one can predict this, many, many, many people throughout history have tried to predict this. And, you know, remember, I think one of the more recent ones was Harold Camping. Remember Harold Camping? This was a few years back. He predicted very famously that the second coming was guaranteed to happen on May 21st, 2011.

And I remember thinking, well, I wonder if we should, what should we, should we cancel worship? What should we, what should we do? And when it didn't happen, he revised his prediction, and he said that it was going to happen in October, and that he had miscalculated. And then after that, I think he retired, which is probably for the best. But lots of people throughout history have attempted to predict when this is going to happen. But Jesus makes it very clear, nobody's going to know the day or the hour, only the Father. And then Jesus talks about Noah. And he brings up Noah to make this point, that Noah and his family, they were prepared when it came, unlike all their neighbors. Nobody else was prepared. Only Noah and his family were prepared. And then he describes other people going about their normal lives when all of a sudden the end comes, and one is prepared, and the other is not. And so he says, two men will be in the field, one will be taken, and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill, one will be taken, and the other left.

Now, some people read this passage in connection to something called the rapture. So I want to take two minutes to talk about that. If you've ever heard of the Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye, it was wildly popular when I was in high school back in the late 90s, and it kind of captured the imagination of many people in our country, especially in the Christian evangelical world. And the idea of the rapture is that before Jesus comes again in glory, before there's the second return, the second advent, there's going to be a kind of secret return where Jesus is going to come back in secret, and he's going to take his elect away in an event called the rapture. So all of a sudden, all around the world, a bunch of people are simply going to disappear. And everyone else is going to be left behind, hence the name of the series. And then there's going to be an extended period of tribulation and challenge and struggle and suffering before Jesus comes again, again. And with all due respect, it's just bad theology. I did a whole series on eschatology, on end times theology, and so there are opportunities if you'd like to go deeper into this. This isn't the focus of this sermon. So I will simply say that for the sake of time, rapture theology emerged in the early 19th century through a man named

John Nelson Darby. It was spread around and popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible. Before Darby came along, this was not taught in the church. None of the early church fathers believed this. It is, again, with all due respect, based on a misreading and misapplication of a few Bible passages. So in this passage, for instance, Jesus is simply making the point that the moment is going to come so suddenly that people are going to have no warning whatsoever. Some people are going to be prepared. Some people are going to be completely, completely unprepared. And so the entire point of Jesus' answer is what he says in verse 44. His point is essentially this. You know that it's going to happen, but you don't know when, so be ready. That's the point. Not just ready, be out the door

ready. Right? Be ready. And, you know, some people hear this and they're like, well, it's been 2,000 years. You know? Are we just supposed to sit with our backpack and our shoes on or our hat on, ready to go by the door? Well, remember what Peter says in 2 Peter to the Lord, a day is like 1,000 years, and 1,000 years are like a day. So it's basically been a weekend from God's perspective. So it could happen at any moment. The real question we need to focus on is not when or if we can predict or how much longer, although it's understandable why we would want to ask those questions. The real question that we need to focus on, I think the question that Jesus wants us to focus on, is this. If this is true, if Jesus is coming again, and if that return is imminent, how does that shape the way we live here and now? How should that shape the way we live our lives? How does the, so let me ask you, how does the expected return of Jesus Christ impact our daily lives? And I would suspect that for many of us, it doesn't really impact our daily lives all that much because there are so many other much more immediate things that we have to focus on. And so it's not often that we sit around contemplating

[17 : 31] Christ's return and how that should impact the way we live. But the Apostle Paul speaks to this in Romans chapter 13, our New Testament lesson that Sharon read a little while ago, where he says that we need to understand the present time. Now, what does he mean by that? Well, he's referring to the fact that Jesus' return is imminent. He says this, the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber.

You know, wake up, get ready, right? That's like when we go around the house and say, we're about to leave, everybody. You know, get ready, get your stuff together, right? Now's the time to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Every day that passes brings us closer to Christ's return. The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. So what is Paul calling us to? Well, I would suggest a couple of things. I would say the overall theme of Paul's answer is this, that if this is true, if Christ is returning and that return is imminent, we should live now as though he has returned.

We should live as though it is daytime. We should live as though the night has passed. So what does that mean? Number one, I would say now is the time. Now is the time. If you haven't already done this, to be reconciled to God, now is the time for that. The day is almost here. Now is the time. For those who are not reconciled to God, the return of Jesus is going to be a very sad day. Jesus himself says, all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see me. And, you know, I think there are a lot of people in our postmodern world, particularly in the postmodern West, who have really tried to move past the whole idea of God, which they regard as sort of outdated and superstitious.

And there was this great effort put forward in the West to try to move society past belief in God and into an age of science and reason. And there has been a lot of great progress that has come with that. It's not all bad. What's interesting, though, is that that effort to move past the idea of God has completely failed in the West. And there are many, many, many people who have jettisoned their faith, who have stopped attending church, who have officially disaffiliated from religion, and yet they are haunted by doubt. But they are haunted by the doubt that comes in the form of the possibility that all of this might actually be true. There might actually be a God. There might actually be a day when that God returns and I'm called to give an account, right? They're haunted by that possibility. [20 : 31] Thomas Nagel is an atheist philosopher at NYU, and he writes about being haunted by belief. He says this, I want atheism to be true.

Now, on some level, probably people could resonate with that, right? I want atheism to be true. A complete lack of accountability, right? Nothing really matters, no meaning. I want atheism to be true. And I'm made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.

He's an atheist, but he holds it with a great disease, a great unease. Speaking of intelligent and well-informed believers, in June 1927, T.S. Eliot became a Christian.

He became an Anglican. And at the time, Eliot belonged to this kind of exclusive group in London called the Bloomsbury Group, which was a small group of artists and intellectuals. And when news of Eliot's conversion got out and the Bloomsbury Group heard of it, they responded with shock and anger and even disgust. And the de facto leader of the Bloomsbury Group at this time was Virginia Woolf.

And so the writer, Virginia Woolf, wrote a letter to one of her peers, and here's what she says about Eliot's conversion. She says, I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church.

[22 : 15] I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.

Now, I think the question that that raises for me is, why such a strong response? Right? Why such a vitriolic response?

She doth protest too much, methinks. Right? The author, Peter Hitchens, writes this. He's the Christian who's the brother of the famous atheist, Christopher Hitchens. But Peter Hitchens writes this about Woolf's letter.

Look at these bilious, ill-tempered words. Shameful, distressing, obscene, dead to us all. Then he says this. There has always seemed to me to be something frantic and enraged about this passage, concealing its real emotion, which I suspect is fear, that Eliot may be right.

Now is the time to be reconciled to God by coming to Jesus in faith and repentance. So, if we are someone, if you are someone who is haunted by the possibility that this is true, now is the time. Now is the time to maybe delve into the questions that have been so easy to put off for so long. And for those who have done so, who have given their lives to Jesus and follow him in faith and repentance, there is great comfort in the promise of Christ's return. There's a completely different emotion that we respond in because what this means for us is that all of history is not spiraling out of control. I don't know if you ever feel like that. Like everything has just gone off the rails in our country and in the world. But what this means is that that is not the case.

[24 : 24] Right? History is not spiraling out of control. We live in a very distinct, time-bounded era. Right? Between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ. It has a very distinct beginning and end. And it's an oldie but a goodie. Probably one of the best analogies for this is the analogy from World War II and the difference between D-Day and V-E Day. Right?

The time between when the allied troops landed at Normandy and victory was secured, it was guaranteed. Right? Everybody knew the war had been won at that point and yet there was still the mopping up.

There was still some of the worst fighting in the war that had to happen. There was still a lot of conflict and opposition until armistice, until V-E Day, until peace could be established. And the Bible tells us that we as Christians live between these two periods. Right? Christmas was D-Day. That was the securing of the victory. When Jesus entered the world and when He gave His life on the cross and when He went into the tomb and then came out of the tomb and when He ascended in glory, that was D-Day.

Right? The battle had been won. And yet, we live in this time between His first and second coming, Christ's victory and Christ's kingship is still being contested. And it is a period characterized by tremendous opposition. Some of the worst fighting in the war is happening right now. But also, there is the worldwide preaching of the gospel and the opportunity extended to all human beings to come and to be reconciled to the true king of the universe. And in this passage, Jesus gives us a glimpse of His ultimate victory. This is what V-E Day is going to be like in our world. And what's wonderful is that the prophets have given us glimpses of this all throughout history. So, our reading from the prophet Isaiah describes V-E Day in the world, he says, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains. Right? All, you know, right now, D.C. is known as a center of human power and influence. One day, that will not be the case. Right? One day, there will be a center of power and influence that is infinitely greater than the greatest of human leaders, than the most powerful of human leaders. Right? The Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains. It will be exalted above the hills and all nations will stream to it. And then in verse 4, He, Jesus, will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore because there's peace. Right? V-E Day has happened. Right? The fighting is done. So, as we live here and now, and we pray for, you know, we pray for the things that break our hearts. We pray for the things that make us feel like all history is spiraling. Right? We've, many of us have been praying and heartbroken over the two members of the National Guard shot in D.C. this week. Right? Sarah Beckstrom, 20 years old, dead.

[27 : 54] Andrew Wolfe, severely wounded. We've been praying for Pastor Jen and those from the Zion Church in China who are imprisoned for their faith. We've been praying for those students and teachers abducted from the Catholic school in Nigeria. Many of us have our own pain and conflict and suffering and struggle that we are enduring right now. And what this tells us is we have the great assurance that God is not going to allow these things to go on forever. There is going to be an unmistakable moment where all of the suffering and evil in this world comes to a decisive end. So, the expected return of Christ will either be very, very bad news or it will be very, very good news, the best possible news.

Are we ready? Are we out the door ready? The last thing I will say, the other implication of this for us is more something that I'm going to encourage you to reflect on in your own time. Now is the time not only to be reconciled to God, but now is the time to love one another. If there is any way in which the expected return of Christ should shape our lives, according to the Bible, it is not only that we focus on loving and being in relationship with the Lord, but it is that we reprioritize our lives so that they are aimed at loving and serving those around us. Paul says this in Romans 13 8, let no debt remain outstanding. In light of the expected return of Christ, let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another. For whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. He's echoing what Jesus himself said. So, this is something that I leave to you to reflect on in your own life. Just a few questions maybe to prime the pump. If Christ were to return tomorrow, what would need to change in your relationships with other people so that you would be prepared?

Where is there forgiveness that needs to happen? Where are there opportunities for reconciliation? Where you might be able to take the first step?

Who is being neglected? Who needs to be prioritized? As you think about your relationships in your family, and coming out of Thanksgiving, maybe some of you are freshly aware of relationships that need work.

As you think about your family, as you think about your friend group, as you think about your relationships in this church, is there someone to whom you owe a debt of love?

[31 : 08] Now's the time to pay it. For the sake of Jesus Christ, who paid his debt of love on the cross for us. Let's pray.

Lord, we dabble and splash in the shallows of great mysteries. And would that this humbles us, Lord.

May this bring us to our knees in awe and wonder and fear and excitement. Lord, these are things that only you fully understand.

But help the focus and the point not be lost on us, Lord. Help us not to be distracted by all the speculation of what this may or may not mean or when it might happen.

Lord, impress upon us the urgency of these words. That now is the time to come to you. Now is the time to love one another.

[32 : 12] Lord, help us each to know what it will take in our own hearts to be ready to meet you, Lord. And help this electrify us, Lord, as a community.

As we think about the days and weeks ahead, as we think about the opportunities that await us as a church, Lord, the opportunities to serve and to grow and to be ministers of your gospel, ministers of reconciliation, Lord.

May this drive us out into the streets, Lord, to share the good news with those who need to hear it. And we pray all this in your son's holy name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.