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Matthew 24:36–44 ESV

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

Luke 17:26–35 5:16-24 ESV

²⁶ *Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— ³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. ³² Remember Lot’s wife. ³³ Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. ³⁴ I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.”*

There is no Second Coming (in the Bible).

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and we begin to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. A popular way to do this is to consider the next time we will celebrate the arrival of Jesus: that is, the so-called “Second Coming.” Here’s what’s interesting: nowhere in the Bible is there any mention of the “Second Coming”. These words are never used, and in fact, nothing like this is ever said in the Bible. The word that is interpreted as referring to the Second Coming in Matthew is actually the Greek word “Parousia”, which simply means “formal arrival” or “official visit” and might have been used to describe a visit by a Roman official, an important person, or a king. In our first passage, Parousia is translated as the word “coming”.

Let’s look at our passages for today. They are part of Jesus’ extended dialogue on the Mount of Olives. We stand next to him, gazing down at Jerusalem, at the spectacular view of the massive temple mount crowned with the gold-accented temple. These lines from the two Gospels represent an example of a common situation in the New Testament: the same story appearing in two different Gospels and in somewhat different forms. They convey a common, consistent message, in that they both compare the great flood of the Old Testament with the ultimate arrival of Jesus at the end of time. The point is that just as no one was ready for the great flood, no one will be ready for the

grand arrival, or Parousia, of Jesus. Indeed, the neighbors of Noah were having a great time, eating, drinking, marrying each other, doing all the things they did in normal life, while Noah built his boat and warned everyone else that a vast flood was coming. They didn't listen and so they died. This biblical ignorance, as we would interpret it today, doesn't represent physical death: it represents spiritual death. When Jesus arrives – and I will avoid saying “when he comes again” – “*two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left*” and “*two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left*”. Just as those who did not listen to Noah, and were not prepared, disappeared in the flood, those who are not prepared for the royal arrival of Jesus will lose out. The usual reading of this is that those who are prepared will be saved and will rapture up into Heaven, while the unprepared will remain on Earth. But there are scholars, who when they read this story, think that the parallel with the story of Noah is exact: they say that it is the ones who are *not* prepared who will go away when Jesus arrives, while the prepared ones remain on Earth. I'll get back to this in a moment.

But first, these Bible verses deliberately portray people doing simple chores at the time Jesus was living on the earth; the idea is that folks will be going about their daily business, oblivious to the imminent arrival of Jesus, just as people at the time of Noah were doing what they did during the course of an average day

instead of preparing for the flood. It's not that they will be sitting around actively laughing at the idea of Jesus coming back. It's that they will have forgotten, or they will not care, or they will be preoccupied by buying and selling, by planting and building. What might we be doing today if Jesus were to arrive? Watching TV? Answering email at work? Defrosting something for dinner? But just as it was disastrous for people to not realize that a gigantic flood was coming, it will be horrendous for those who lose the opportunity to see Jesus coming for his official visit. In Luke's slightly different version, there is a chilling line: "*there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left*". This drives home just how personal it will be, just how divided our population will be on that day. There will be married couples, where one person is prepared and the other is not.

I don't believe that the point is as negative as we have interpreted these passages in the past. Keep in mind that the Bible does not talk about a "Second Coming". The "Parousia", to use the Greek word, isn't going to be an event where Jesus comes in a wildly wrathful state to condemn and punish those who "remain behind", while all the good people go flying up into the clouds. No, the word Parousia refers to a grand visit, something meant to grace us, to bestow on us something beautiful. The focus is on those who are prepared, those who are ready for the official visit of Jesus at the end of time. The others, since they

forgot to get themselves prepared, will simply be forgotten. They will be the ones who disappear, in that they will just slip away spiritually. Notice that phrase that appears multiple times: *“one will be taken and one left”*. This doesn't say that the good ones are taken, and the bad ones are left; it could be that the good ones are left, and the bad ones are taken. The Bible says that at the end of time, Jesus will come back to us right here. He won't be up in the sky somewhere. That's why there are scholars who believe that the ones who will be left will be the ones who are aware that Jesus is coming. They will stay with their savior. The others will be forgotten. Maybe the real point is that this is a spiritual statement, not a literal one. This passage was meant to tell us of the beauty that awaits us when we are spiritually prepared for Jesus. It's not that some people will rapture into the sky while others are stuck in New Jersey forever; it's that some will lose out while the others will be ready to spend their time with Jesus. And we don't have to experience this only at the end of time. We can experience the arrival, the presence of Jesus at any time. We just need to be aware and always prepared.

Our Christian response to this story from the two Gospels isn't that we need to be in a constant state of paranoiac repentance. Our response is that we should live in a way that mimics the values taught to us by Jesus, and that we should live this way every minute of our lives. That's how we keep God within us

always. That's the message for Advent. That's what we are celebrating today. We remember that Jesus cared for those who had the least, for children, for the poor, for the sick, for those with no power in this world. Jesus taught us that all human life was equally valuable in the eyes of God. He taught us to forgive, to be generous, to bless others in the same way that God blesses us. And we are to be in prayer always. Indeed, we don't live in constant fear if we live constantly connected to God via the grace delivered by the Holy Spirit.

Our final judgement at the end of time will be a reflection of how we live now. Do we live in spiritual darkness or do we embrace the love and graciousness of God? While we await the first coming of Jesus on Christmas, we think about how once Jesus is here, we will never turn our backs on him. We will always be prepared. We will always be facing God. As Christians, we are called upon to live in a different way than those who paid no attention to Noah as he was building his ark. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of our new way of life; his birth is the thing that makes us stand apart from others.

I've told you a lot of stories about growing up as a Catholic boy. I've talked about my grammar school, Santa Clara, in Oxnard, California. I've described the sisters who taught us, who saw that us kids had food and clothing. It was they, and not the priests, who seemed to me to be the ones who lived the way Jesus

taught us to live – in simplicity, humility, love, and warmth. Our principal was an extremely elderly sister named Sister Adele. She was very small and very shriveled. Behind her back, we called her Sister Prune. I think she knew this and didn't care. One day, a boy in class asked a politically incorrect question, given that she was an elderly person. She was substituting for our regular teacher who was sick and was resting at the convent, on the other side of the white cinder block wall that surrounded the school. When she substituted, Sister Adele tended to forget about math, history, geography, and essentially taught religion all day long. This boy asked her what happens to us when we die. I guess she seemed like the right person to ask, since she was clearly going to be making that journey soon. She said, "Nothing, at least I hope nothing happens to me." "But aren't you going to Heaven?" asked the boy incredulously. "Sure," she said, "but I am ready for God. I am ready to spend eternity with Jesus. I don't know if I'll actually go anywhere. You see, God is here right now. Why should I go anywhere?"

Our passage from Matthew comes near the end of Chapter 24. But right in the middle of our passage is where Jesus, who is speaking here, on the Mount of Olives, switches from prophesy to practical advice. The switch-over happens on verse 42. Some say that the people who broke the Bible up into Chapters and verses hundreds of years after it was written should have begun Chapter 25 right

there, as a way of separating these two kinds of material, instead of putting the verses from 42 onward in Chapter 24. I'd like to read from verse 42 until what is now the beginning of Chapter 25: *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.* ⁴⁵ *“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?”* ⁴⁶ *Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.* ⁴⁷ *Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.* ⁴⁸ *But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’* ⁴⁹ *and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards,* ⁵⁰ *the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know* ⁵¹ *and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

This says that the ones who aren't ready for the coming of our Lord will be sent off to be with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Everyone else, those who are prepared - the ones who take care of other people in the name of God - they will be affirmed by their savior.

When that boy in my class asked Sister Prune about going to Heaven, I think she was trying to say that where we go when we die isn't a physical place, and where we will all be at the end of time isn't a physical place, either. Remember that we live in the Kingdom of Heaven right here on Earth. We don't know what happens when we die, but part of being prepared is knowing that the goal isn't to be prepared to get the hell out of New Jersey - which is where Wendy is from, by the way. There will be no suitcase to pack, no travel plans to make. When the end comes, we'll simply see God all around us. But if we're not prepared, if we're too busy paying attention to the physical world, and not to our connection to God, we might indeed disappear, in that we will not see God. The Second Coming, to use that term, isn't a physical thing. It's a spiritual thing. The Second Coming is when God and Jesus will be revealed to all those who have been praying, all those who have been focused on living like Christ today. As we prepare for the first coming of Jesus, remember that he never went away. His human identity did, but that's all. Jesus is here. There won't actually be a literal, physical Second Coming. We just need to be ready to fully experience his presence someday. And in the meantime, we need to be aware that God is actually here with us, right now. Amen.