

AT AN UNEXPECTED HOUR
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 24:36-44

It came in the mail a month ago. The envelope looked innocent enough, much like other appeal letters, credit card offers, or advertisements. "Hmmm," I thought, "must be some information about prescription drugs for seniors." I knew we were going to have a Faith Matters/adult education class on a related topic, so I opened it up, to find.....an AARP card. With my name on it. Congratulations, Louise Westfall!

Where has the time of my life gone? It's cliché to note that "time flies" but it really does. In a heartbeat, in the twinkling of an eye, the circle of life brings us all around. I can't read the newspaper (or the Bible for that matter!) without glasses; I am drawn to moisturizing products described as "age-minimizing;" it has become necessary to have my hair restored to its natural color. (though come to think of it, none of these had happened until I became pastor here!) One reason I think we celebrate birthdays is to mark time's passage; to keep us mindful that our life on earth had a beginning, and it has an end. That knowledge imbues each moment with beauty and meaning, and can help us order our priorities accordingly.

Biblical people viewed human history similarly to an individual's lifespan, with a beginning and an end. God was intimately involved in its progression and ultimate culmination. A whole genre of biblical literature, known as "apocalyptic," is concerned with God's "revelation" in historical events, and the morning text is from that genre. The first-century Christian church had its own particular version of "aging anxiety" in the prevalent belief that Christ was returning to earth to claim his throne very soon—certainly within their lifetimes. The close proximity of this climactic event held serious implications for behavior: *are you prepared today, this minute, to meet your Lord?* So our text is presented as a warning, a call to be alert for the coming of the Lord. It's from a much longer section of the gospel, describing signs that will portend the end of human history and the inauguration of God's triumphant reign. The full section ends, significantly, with the depiction of the final judgment, separating sheep and goats, those who have cared for the hungry, the stranger, the sick and imprisoned, and those who have not. The vivid images we find here are cloaked in declarations that the hour of Christ's return is unknown, implying the necessity of watchfulness. Are you ready?

Listen for God's word in the reading from the gospel of Matthew, in the twenty-fourth chapter, beginning at the 36th verse (found on page ____ of the pew Bibles). [Matthew 24:36-44]

A few years ago at my former church, a woman came through the line after worship and pressed a book into my hands. "You've got to read this. It's a novel about the end of the world, just as the Bible portrays it." The book, of course, was "Left Behind," the first in a series of eight destined to become phenomenal best sellers. I read it, but I have to say I wasn't much impressed with its wooden, literal interpretation of rich biblical metaphor and its thinly-veiled political agenda. Except for its popular, action-thriller format, the series constitutes only the latest offering in end-of-the-world predictions. Throughout history, individuals and groups have announced a time for the final judgment, and pointed to various wars, revolutions, and natural phenomena such as earthquakes and floods as its warm-up acts. So much so that I have a hard time believing it, or grasping its significance for the challenges of daily living. In fact, the strongest advocates of this perspective appear to be the least interested in working for changes that would make this life better for many who are in need. Being one of those "left behind" doesn't terrify me beyond the every day terror....of eating while others go hungry,of snuggling in a warm bed, while some sixteen million refugees worldwide search for a home, and local homeless persons take shelter in a cardboard box or over a heating grate, ...or even, the restless questioning of my own life's purpose and meaning.

No, if this text is meant to be a fearsome forecast or if it is used as a spiritual club to get me into line, then it simply isn't effective. There are terrors aplenty in the daily litany of violence and warfare and poverty and disease to worry much about some solitary thief.

But what if these words are meant not to frighten but console us? What if they are meant not to threaten but to inspire? What if they actually point to a reality stronger than the uncertainty of this day, or that event, or the unknown-but-looming future? I hear these words of Jesus as both a call to mindfulness, but also to carefree-ness; of staying awake with awareness, but also of sleeping the peaceful sleep of the trusting. These seeming opposites are held together by one truth alone: God knows.

About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels, nor the Son...
Friends, despite the predictions of forecasters, and the plans laid by enterprising souls, you and I are not in charge of the world.

We do not—we cannot—know when human history is going to end—any more than we can know when our personal histories will be removed from this world to enter another. We are not creators of the world's redemption, the ones responsible for ushering in a new day of peace and justice and abundant life for all. But God is. God has created a plan for redeeming all creation, and has been faithfully working across all time to bring it to pass. God knows. It will happen. We can count on that, and sleep well at night because the world is in good hands.

Jesus the baby born in Bethlehem came, and caught the world off guard. In many ways, we are still unprepared even for recognizing that great gift of God's love. But just as surely, Christ the Son of Man will come again, and in all likelihood, catch us off guard once more.

And that is why the text pleads with us to stay awake. To get ready. To participate as God's realm unfolds. That makes today count; it means our actions and choices *do* matter, as we make room for God's rule amid powers that oppose it. Where are the places of hunger and hurt where we can offer bread and compassion? Who are the strangers we can welcome, and the children we can bring safely home? What unjust systems can we identify and dismantle, and what ones will we build in their place? What relationships need forgiveness and reconciling grace?

Today we begin the season of Advent, a word which means "coming." It is the church's "new year" in which we celebrate the dawn of a new day. While we often focus on the season as one which "remembers" the coming of Jesus as the babe of Bethlehem, advent also invites us to "anticipate" the "second coming" of Christ as ruler of the whole world. The first coming signaled the advent of hope, through One who was bringing light and life to all. We are preparing today for its fulfillment, the assurance of which can sustain hope even now.

The faith community has been waiting for a very long time. The early Church's expectation of Christ's imminent return was not realized, and we 21st century inheritors of that promise might resonate with the lethargy provoked by its delay.

And still, God's word to us is "keep awake." An example I know of someone who understood this is Lisa Neville, daughter of members Jim and Pat Neville. Though she was limited in mobility, sight and hearing as a result of a brain tumor that struck when she was eleven years old, she lived in the moment, vibrantly, enthusiastically. Her life-long ambition was to make a positive contribution to the world, and did she ever! She was a teacher and encourager of children and others who are labeled "handicapped."

She “field tested” buildings—including this church—for their accessibility, and her evaluation prompted us to make modifications. Lisa refused to let her condition overcome her strength of spirit, and left this world a better place for having lived fully and given generously every one of her 26 years.

Friends, today is the day to work for God’s rule of peace and justice. Today is the day to love God’s people. Christ is coming. . . and we’re not getting any younger!

HALLELUJAH, FOR THE LORD OUR GOD THE ALMIGHTY REIGNS. THE KINGDOM OF THE WORLD HAS BECOME THE KINGDOM OF OUR LORD AND OF HIS MESSIAH, AND HE SHALL REIGN FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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