



## The Way of the Past: Keep Awake!

Matthew 24:36-44

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For students of church history, it's known as the "Great Disappointment." Followers of Baptist minister William Miller prepared wholeheartedly for October 22, 1844, the day he was convinced that Jesus would come again. He was apparently quite the persuasive preacher, as he convinced many others, too. They quit their jobs and cashed out their accounts. Over and over again, by way of preaching and teaching, Miller insisted that Jesus was coming back exactly as he, Miller himself, had calculated. He called this impending return "the Advent." Of course, October 22, 1844 came and went. Miller had to revise his theory, and many of his followers were devastated. One of them, Henry Emmons, wrote: "I waited all Tuesday [October 22] and dear Jesus did not come. I waited all the forenoon of Wednesday [the 23rd], and was well in body as I ever was, but after 12 o'clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay prostrate for two days. There was no pain — I was simply sick with disappointment."<sup>1</sup>

After today's reading, I wonder if there isn't a small measure of disappointment among us here, too. After all, we're ready to celebrate. The greens are up (though not the bows and not the poinsettias — not yet!). The paraments and stoles are purple. The candles are in place, and the first one is already shining brightly. We're but minutes away from our Advent Festival.

And all a sudden we're faced with a story filled with warning that any day now, any hour, Jesus might kidnap someone at work and then break into your house and rob you. For the record, this story is not included in the Christmas pageant our young people will present on December 11. But this story — or one very similar to it, told by one of the other gospel writers — is included in the lectionary every Advent. In fact, it's our introduction to Advent every year. It reminds us that each year, when we pull out all the festive decorations, we're actually anticipating two Advents. Advent means "coming." We anticipate the first coming of Jesus into this world, born in a manger to a couple of outcast refugees, visited

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<sup>1</sup> James White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller: Gathered From His Memoir by the Late Sylvester Bliss, and From Other Sources*, p. 310.

by shepherds and magi and angels alike. And at the same time, though it gets less attention in holiday cards and Hallmark movies, we anticipate the second coming of Jesus into this world, when he returns to once again make right every wrong and bind up every brokenness.

Matthew 24 is part of what is known as the Olivet Discourse — one of Jesus' longer teachings, delivered on the Mount of Olives. This teaching comes right before Jesus is arrested and crucified — so we can imagine that he is saying all this at a time when tensions are high and people are scared. And even if they didn't really understand what he was talking about, his followers understood that something was brewing. That life as they knew it was about to shift. Change — big change — was coming.

Jesus said all these things to people who were already afraid. But far too often in our more modern day, these words are fear. If I understand the text, that's not Jesus' point at all.

There are a number of days from my years of elementary school that I don't remember. Most of them, actually. But one that is etched in my mind started off innocently enough: I went to school. Third grade. It was a Tuesday. Nothing unusual. Shortly after returning home from school, however, I was right in the middle of my afternoon snack when all sorts of commotion erupted outside. At least a half-dozen police cars descended on our neighborhood, and with a bullhorn repeated this message over and over: "STAY INSIDE YOUR HOME. OFFICERS ARE IN PURSUIT OF MAN PRESUMED TO BE ARMED AND DANGEROUS. STAY INSIDE YOUR HOME."

I had been eating my snack at the kitchen table, which had large windows looking out over the backyard. Frightened, I jumped

out of my chair just in time to see a man climb over the fence. Always calm in an emergency, I responded by shrieking, "Mom! Mom! Mom!" Having alerted my own authorities, I left her to call 911 and proceeded to defend the perimeter of my home and everyone in it. I sent my brother, in kindergarten at the time, to the upstairs bathroom, with instructions to take the dogs with him, lock the door, and lay down in the bathtub. I then collected every jump rope and bungee cord I could find and created what can only be called an unholy tangled mess weaving those impenetrable materials through the railing on each side of the steps and tying them into several knots. I moved up the stairs as I worked, apparently having decided that my mother, who was still on the phone with the police, would have to fend for herself.

I braced myself against that bathroom door, courageously facing outward, armed with the only thing left at my disposal — dog toys. And yes, some of them are soft and squishy, but some of them are ... less soft and squishy. I should add here that the way our house was designed, the upstairs hallway, where I was surrounded by tennis balls and rawhide chews, looked out over the lower level.

From my perch, I could see both the front door and the staircase, or what was formerly known as a staircase, now masquerading as a web of an enormous, and enormously confused, spider.

Now, my mother claims that she yelled up from the kitchen that the police had chased him into the neighbor's yard, where they apprehended him. To this day, she insists that she shared this information. We disagree on this detail, but if — IF! — she shared this information, it was not loud enough to break through my newly installed home security system.

So of course, when the front door began to open slowly a few minutes later, I could only conclude that the worst was happening. I launched a fleet of dog toys at the door, and the more the door opened, the more I threw.

My father remains grateful that I have terrible aim. After all, he was just innocently returning home from the office.

Years later, I can tell this story with a sense of humor. But at the time, I was terrified. I thought that I, and the people I loved, were in danger. And there's nothing funny about genuine fear.

But again — the more I study this text, the more I am convinced that it is not meant to frighten us. It's actually meant to comfort the fear that we already have. After all, the phrase used most during our Christmas stories comes from the angels, when they say "Do not be afraid."

First of all, this teaching comes in response to the disciples questions. "Tell us," they say, "when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" And Jesus responds, "Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from heaven."

In other words — it's going to get dark before it gets light. Which sounds a lot like ... Advent.

The disciples ask these questions, though, because they are already unsettled and afraid. They know something of what is coming for Jesus, their leader, their mentor, their friend. They are in the dusk of twilight already. When the worst you can imagine is happening to someone you love, it feels like the world is ending. You all know that. I wish you didn't, but I know that you do.

And so Jesus says, "Look. It's going to be okay. There will still be good news afoot. Nothing can change that. But, he says, there will be times, and this is one of them, when you are going to have to look good and hard for it."

The way Jesus says this is a bit extreme. In fact, Tom Long, a renowned preacher and longtime professor of preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, he says Jesus needs to communicate so much, so quickly here, "his language is stretched almost out of recognizable shape."<sup>2</sup>

But no matter what shape it comes in, Jesus' language is always, at its very core, filled with the promise of good news. And if we cannot see it, sometimes we need to change the way we're looking at it. Have you ever worn 3D glasses, at a movie theater or theme park or even at the eye doctor? If you have, you know this — you can't walk around with them on all day long. It distorts the world too much. But if you aren't wearing them at just the right time, you'll see some things. You just won't see the film or the photo in all its glory.

Jesus' language here is something like that, I think. We can read it just as it is. Or we can read it through the lens of love. That's an actual part of our Presbyterian doctrine. That all scripture is to be interpreted through a lens of love.

So look at again: "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. And then, in the very same way, two were working in a field, and suddenly one was gone. And then two women were grinding grain, and suddenly one was gone."

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew (Westminster Bible Companion)*, p. 265.

The interpretation we almost always hear is that Jesus is talking about when he will return and whisk the faithful away to heaven, where they are happy forever and ever, amen, while the forgotten, forsaken ones are left behind, awaiting a terrible time. The worst thing, according to this interpretation, is to be left behind.

But remember the rest of Noah's story? Jesus himself tells us to look there for the answer. The ones who were swept away by the waters ... we don't hear anything more about them. It's the ones left behind who are tasked with holy work: building a new world and embracing a whole new way of living, even in the midst of uncertainty. The ones left behind are not forsaken. They are the ones entrusted with a whole new future.<sup>3</sup>

When it feels to you like the world is ending, Jesus seems to say, "It's not. I promise. Keep your eyes open. Pay attention. Keep awake. There is good news afoot, and there is work to be done, a new world to build, a new way of living to embrace."

It may come in the field while harvesting or in the kitchen while grinding. It may come early one morning on the subway or late at night in the eyes of a homeless person on the street corner. It may come at your desk while filing or on the phone while negotiating. It may come in the dentist office or the doctor's office, sitting at your dining table or resting in your living room. It may come with stranger or friend, child or adult. It may come when you expect for when you don't — but it will come — over and over again, a chance to build a new world a chance to embrace a new way of living with our speech and our actions with our decisions and our devotion.

When I barricaded my house against a potential intruder, I shut us all away. When my father tried to "break in" he got hit with tennis balls and dog bones. And as he rubbed his knee and surveyed the tangle of jump ropes lining the staircase, he said, "I'm going to trust that somehow, love is behind all of this."

Friends, this Advent, we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ — in a manger, to save us, and at the end, to save us. But do not close your eyes in fear. Keep awake. Because the only thing breaking in is love, and the kingdom of God is at hand, for those who have eyes to see it.

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<sup>3</sup> O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Matthew (Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary)*, p. 270.