

Advent 2010 Preaching Series: “Blessings of the Manger” – Part 1: “The Blessing of God’s Future – Being Prepared”

Matt. 24:36-44

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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I am basing this Advent preaching series on a study book produced by a United Methodist pastor in Virginia, Jeanne Torrence Finley. It was published this year for use in churches by Abingdon Press and is called *Blessings of the Manger*. For this First Sunday of Advent the theme is *The Blessing of God’s Future: Being Prepared*. Other *Blessings of the Manger* for Sundays two through four of Advent are: *The Blessing of Peace: Being Peacemakers* (Dec. 5), *The Blessing of Waiting: Being Patient* (Dec. 12), *The Blessing of God with Us: Being Christ-like* (Dec. 19), and *The Blessing of Light: Being Light* (Christmas Eve). Please note that there will be a new 30 minute service of Word and Table at 5:30pm on Christmas Eve prior to the two hour window from 6-8pm when you may enter and leave the sanctuary any time for the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Let us now begin our consideration of *Blessings of the Manger* as we ponder *The Blessing of God’s Future: Being Prepared*.

For eight years the same lady cut my hair in Charlotte. Around this time of the year when I went for a haircut the first thing she would ask me was: “Well, Ivan, are you ready for Christmas?” “No, of course I’m not ready,” I would say, thinking to myself, “What a dumb question to ask me!” I considered this lady one of those rare human beings who would start to get ready for Christmas a year in advance! I knew her question referred to whether or not I had completed my Christmas shopping, wrapped all of my gifts, sent all of my cards, and all that stuff. However, the question would evoke a deeper response in me ...it would force me to ask the question that today’s gospel lesson poses: “Will I be ready when Jesus returns? Will I be prepared when I least expect Jesus?”

I guess my honest answer to this Advent question is, “No!” You see, I was not a very successful boy scout. I never did earn an Eagle award, like Tyler. Furthermore, I probably would never be fully prepared if and when Jesus returned during my earthly lifetime. But please hear this: it doesn’t worry me one little bit because I believe my relationship with Jesus

Christ could cope with that kind of surprise. Listen to this good news: It is my relationship with Christ that is preparation enough to receive and enjoy the blessing of God's future.

Our daughter, Sarah, was born prematurely. She came before Carol and I were fully prepared for her to make her entry into this world. She was five weeks early. We did not have everything ready by any stretch of the imagination, but her coming on Sunday, January 25, 1981 during the Sunday service hour was not something we could change. We had to deal with the suddenness of her arrival . . . we had to scurry . . . we had to work through the nights to get the unfinished nursery ready . . . but the relationship we had built up with this little being for nine months prior to her birth was strong enough to handle her early, unexpected arrival. She doesn't seem any the worse for it, nor does she hold anything against us (as far as I am aware) for not being fully prepared for her coming. We survived and continued with the new life that followed the coming of Sarah, reaping many blessings as she grew and brought us great joy, just as Luke did four years later.

Do you see now why it really does not worry me if I don't have it all together when Jesus comes. Sure, I would be surprised . . . sure I would no doubt scurry around . . . sure I might even panic a little . . . but I would steady myself, take a deep breath, and say, "Welcome back to earth, Lord!" And we would go from there. I bet it would turn out okay. Indeed, I expect the blessing of God's future with the second coming of Christ to be an experience of great pleasure and joy.

Now let me hasten to add that I think it would be quite different if I had no relationship with Christ. That is quite a different scenario. In fact, I think it is not smart, not cool, and quite unwise. What is more I think it could prove to be very hazardous not to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. But that is another sermon for another time. I want to emphasize that this scripture in the 24th chapter of Matthew's gospel was directed at the disciples who had developed a relationship with Jesus Christ. This was *not* a teaching directed at those who had never responded to Jesus' call to follow him. It is very important to recognize the context of this teaching: the church. It is part of an inside story set in the context of the church. That is to say, this was *not* a message Jesus was directing at the masses.

A close look at the beginning of this chapter reveals Matthew reporting that Jesus and the disciples had left the public arena of the Temple. Away from the crowds the disciples asked

Jesus a question. Today's gospel lesson is part of the answer that Jesus gave his disciples *privately*. In fact, verse 3 of chapter 24 underscores very specifically that the teachings that follow are for disciples: "the disciples came to him *privately*, saying, 'Tell us...'"

The beginning and the end of Matthew's gospel contain stories and teachings that are for everyone to hear and to take to heart. Of the birth narrative in the first two chapters of the gospel we may appropriately sing, *We've a story to tell to the nations*. Similarly, the end of Matthew's gospel where Jesus gives the command to disciples to go into the world and preach, and baptize, and teach all nations with the promise that he will be with them always, is a teaching to share with all people. But this lesson about being prepared for the blessing of God's future when Jesus would suddenly return to earth is for the inner circle of the church.

The message for today's church on this First Sunday of Advent is a part of the teaching of Jesus – carefully preserved as an inside story just for the church. As such, the purpose of the teaching – if you'll pardon the expression – is not "to scare the hell out of anybody!" On the contrary, the purpose of today's gospel lesson is to encourage the faithful with the hopeful news about Jesus' return and the blessing of God's future for God's people.

"Be alert because you don't know on what day your Lord will return . . . Be prepared because the Son of Man will return when you least expect him." This is indeed hopeful news, but it is also startling news. It is clear from the text that Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected. So I want you to help me watch for the Lord's return. Is that okay with you? Am I right? Isn't that what we're supposed to do . . . to watch for Jesus to return? The Lord could come at any moment and I want us to be among the first to see Jesus return. So when we hear the trumpet sound, we'll simply look to the East! I must admit that I am unnerved by our text that states clearly that Jesus will return when we least expect him.

The words Matthew records Jesus saying in our text announce startlingly hopeful news. This God we worship . . . this Jesus we follow . . . may startle us . . . may even shock us . . . may burst suddenly and unexpectedly "out of the blue," so to speak, to fulfill our hope despite all mounting evidence of hopelessness. This is the God who will not be tamed or possessed . . . this is the wild God who will drop in again on earth unexpectedly, according to the gospel narrative, not to destroy but to consummate God's plan to save, to gather, to heal, to reconcile, and to bring peace and unity to all creation.

I want you to get this point, if you don't get any other point today: the hope proclaimed in the record of Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 24 – the blessing of God's future – does *not* begin or end with us or our experience of God. The hope proclaimed in today's gospel lesson begins and ends with God. The blessing of God's future was probably startling but also very hopeful news for Matthew's church. It is certainly startling but hopeful news for our church as we look towards God's future for us and for all humankind. But it is also a sober reminder to all religious people that God will not be domesticated, or boxed in to our understanding or personal spiritual experience, or given dimensions that suit our brand of theology, or even formulated according to our doctrines or creeds. This is the God that the Bible describes as the *Alpha* and *Omega*, the “beginning and the end,” the “first and the last.”

Christians claim that God's nature and plan were supremely revealed in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ, but Matthew declares that not even the angels know . . . not even Jesus knows . . . the day or the hour when God will send God's Son again to wrap the world up and to offer it back to the Father, redeemed and restored in its original state of beauty and goodness.

In case you took me seriously about watching with me for Jesus' return, I'm telling you that you're off the hook! There's no point looking into the sky for Jesus' return because Jesus may turn up suddenly and unexpectedly in a seat beside me, or before me, or behind me on a bus, or an airplane . . . in a desk beside, before, or behind me in the office where I work . . . in a room beside, below, or above mine in the apartment complex or retirement home where I live . . . in the house next door . . . in the stranger on Randolph Street or sitting on a bench in a park.

Let me take note of what Martin Luther said when he was once asked what he would do if he knew for certain the world was going to end tomorrow. Without hesitation he replied, “I would plant an apple tree this afternoon.” Luther was not given to speculation about the *ending* of the world. He focused rather on the *end* of the world, that is, the *purpose* of the world which God intends for the present time. Luther would plant an apple tree today, even though the world will be ending tomorrow, because he believed that the blessing of God's future with the second coming of Jesus does not excuse us from what God requires of us here and now. Our text in Matthew 24 is all about being prepared by continuing steadfastly to do the work and

ministry that God has called us to do through God's Son Jesus Christ until the blessing of God's future becomes a present reality. Jeanne Finley calls this "active waiting and watching."

A preacher named John Shea tells the story of a woman he encountered in the parking lot of a food store three days before Christmas. As she stuffed grocery bags into her trunk, she kept muttering to herself, "I'm not going to make it." Shea writes: "As I passed her, I smiled and piped up with a cheerful voice, 'You are going to make it. You are going to make it.'"

While the world whines, "We're not going to make it," the startlingly hopeful news published by Matthew concerns the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who declares to the world, "You are going to make it. You are going to make it . . . because I am coming again." Only when we as the church – the insiders – are able to grasp this teaching . . . only when we are holding on to this hope . . . only when we are as alert and as prepared as we can be for the sudden and unexpected return of Jesus . . . may we tell the other stories of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection.

I'll leave us with a question to ponder: Does "being prepared" for the blessing of God's future mean that we are obsessed with looking for Jesus' return, or does it mean that we are able to plant apple trees today even if we know that the world will end tomorrow?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.