



We Are the Locals in the World of God's Purpose!

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
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Matthew 24:36-44

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in the 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, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner 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. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Catherine Sider Hamilton, Professor of New Testament and New Testament Greek at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, Canada, shared a story this week in one of the commentaries. It is so appropriate for today's lesson, I wanted to share it with you. It goes like this: There are wadis in Israel, Egypt, North Africa. Wadis are valleys that slice through the dry land. They are dry and empty most of the year, enticing one to hike or a picnic there. But come a sudden rain, in no time, a wadi becomes a lethal, raging river. The locals living in the area know about wadis, but travelers who don't the area, are not familiar with wadis.

One spring, an English family visiting the country did just what a wadi invites you to do: They had a picnic. Mom and Dad and two kids picnicked in a nearby wadi. They didn't know anything about wadis. As they were eating and drinking there, suddenly a storm began. In a flash, the torrent was upon them, crashing down through the wadi without any warning at all. The flood came and swept them all away.

You do not know when the end of the age is coming, but it will come, Jesus says. So, be alert. Stay awake! Be ready! For as in the days of Noah, so will the Son of Man come. God tells Noah to build an ark. So, he does on a place where no water is found. He was told to be ready. To be prepared. And he was. His friends and neighbors must have thought Noah was out of his mind. They continued to live as usual. They were eating and drinking, marrying, and so on, until the day Noah entered the ark. They knew nothing, until the flood came and swept them all away in the flood. All that was left behind were Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark.

Jesus warns of the coming of the Son of Man. Two are in the field; one will be the taken and the other left behind. Two women are grinding meal together. One will be taken, and the other left behind. The point is that you want to be left behind. You want to be the ones left on the ark, the man in the field, and the woman who continues to grind the meal. So be ready. Be alert. Stay awake. Be prepared. "*The day of my Parousia will come suddenly,*" Jesus says. Parousia is a Greek word that means arrival or appearance. The New Testament often calls Jesus' future return his Parousia. The day is coming on which the reign of God will be spread abroad over the world like the dawn. So, we are to be ready.

The English family were not local to the area and did not know about wadis. They weren't ready for the storm that was about to sweep them away. But the locals knew about the danger of flash floods, and so they watch. And they don't picnic in wadis.

Being "locals" to the gospel message, we know Jesus will one day come to make the world right. It is our hope, but we simply don't know when. Our job is to watch, stay awake, and be ready because we are the "locals" in the world of God's purpose. We long for the day, when justice springs up from the earth and mercy rains down from the heavens, for that day is the reign of God.

So how do we prepare ourselves in the 21st century? As modern-day disciples of Jesus, our job is to watch for the signs of God's presence. We are to live lives that matter, that have purpose and meaning, lives that work for the good of others. God's power, revealed through the cross and the resurrection, is found in healing the sick, standing with the broken and suffering, bringing sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and feeding the hungry.

On this first day of Advent, we reflect on what it means to live faithful lives as we put up our trees, decorate our homes, and wait for Jesus' arrival. First, don't expect the road to be easy.

Second, remember God is faithful, even though all around us, we that the world is violent, corrupt, and broken. Jesus describes a future in which people must guard against counterfeit Messiahs—religious charlatans. Depending on which Gospel you're reading, Jesus says that there will be wars, famines, earthquakes, plagues, persecution, suffering, families violently turning on their own members, and "*the love of many will grow cold.*"

These images describe the bloodshed and panic during the revolt of 66–70 CE close to when the Temple was torn down in Jerusalem and around the time when the gospels were written down. They sound eerily familiar to me and I wonder whether Jesus has been looking at the news feed on my iPad!

Third, our role as we wait for the Messiah to come, is to bear witness to the good news of new life. To look to the divine mercy in Jesus Christ. Rather than tearing others down with petty grievances we perceive or personality traits we don't like, we are to build others up with grace, love and support. We are to look for the assets, gifts, and values in those who serve us. Our role is to help usher in God's kingdom here and now in this place, in our homes, at our places of work, and with whomever we encounter. Our role is to bring hope for future, as Isaiah's does in our lesson today.

Isaiah looks to the day when the Lord's house shall be established in the highest of mountains.

Not to put you on the spot Bible class scholars, but what did we learn about the symbolic meaning of mountains in the Bible last week? In

the ancient world, mountains were seen as places where heaven and earth meet. They provide access to divine wisdom and power. Mountains were seen as enduring and unchangeable. They symbolized the eternal and reliable nature of God's laws and teachings. The physical act of ascending a mountain often paralleled a spiritual journey to a higher state of mind or a closer relationship with God. It was where one was more receptive to divine truth and instruction. Prophets often delivered God's messages (teachings) from mountains. They used mountain imagery in their prophecies to convey concepts of God's ultimate kingdom and universal teaching of all nations.

Where did Noah's ark rest when the waters receded? On a mountain. Where did God give Moses the Law? On a mountain. Where was the setting for the prophet Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal? On a mountain. Where was the Jerusalem temple built? On a mountain. Where did Jesus preach his greatest sermon in Matthew? On a mountain. Where was Jesus lifted up on a cross outside the ancient walls of Jerusalem? On a mountain, Mount Moriah. It is the place where Abraham went to sacrifice his son Isaac. It is the mountainous area upon which David built his altar and later Solomon builds the Temple. This location becomes home to the Temple Mount, and it is in this same region that Jesus is sacrificed.

Trinity may not have been built on a mountain but notice how its interior is built. Where is the altar, the cross, the pulpit? It is raised up for a reason. It is the place where God's words are proclaimed. On the stairs are where our children's message is taught. It is the place where the elements are consecrated, all the symbols of God's reign and God's presence are in this place.

So, as we wait for Messiah, let us be aware of God's love and grace in the here and now. Let us watch for the special times when God's kingdom breaks into our dreary world. Let us be blessings to others. Let us use the gifts that God has given each one of us. For we are the "locals" in the world of God's purpose. God desires that we build each other up.

We long for God's reign, a time when people will be drawn to God's Word and instruction. And in the process, be transformed. We long for God's reign when weapons are beaten into plowshare and pruning hooks, so peace prevails among the nations and all world is fed. As "locals" in the world of God's purpose, may God's light shine brightly in each of you. May your lights shine as God empowers you to do good works that benefit others and that glorify our Father in heaven.

In Jesus name, amen.