

Preparing for Eternity?

Matthew 24:36-44

I am not a Black Friday shopper. I never have been and have no desire to ever be one. It's not because I'm a cranky traditionalist scornful of the way Christmas shopping has infringed upon the sanctity of Thanksgiving (which has now become the launching day for the holiday sales), so that out of principle and moral indignation I'm boycotting the mad rush to the mall. It's not because I'm too busy over this weekend watching football, performing wedding ceremonies, or writing Sunday's sermon (all of which happen to be true).

No. The real reason I'm not a Black Friday shopper is because I'm too lazy. I don't feel like waking up earlier than I normally would just to get caught up in the insanity of furiously grabbing items in order to save a few bucks. I certainly would never be caught sleeping out in a tent in a mall parking lot just so I could be one of the first people in line when they open the doors at Best Buy at some ungodly hour! I love hi-tech gadgets, but that's just crazy-making as far as I'm concerned. There's nothing I want that badly, and no one I love so dearly, that I would abandon my sensibilities to join the circus atmosphere of shopping on this particular weekend (actually, that's not completely true; I would do *anything* for my dearly beloved wife, including sleep in a tent...which is likely what I'll now have to do)!

You may think I'm just being some pulpit-pounding party pooper. You could be right. A lot of people find Black Friday to be one of the highlights of this time of year. They love the anticipation of holiday shopping, eager to work their way through the circulars

stuffed into the daily newspaper or to respond to the ads online or on TV; it's what gets them into the mood for planning for the holiday. When it starts to get cold, when snow is in the air, when carols are heard along with the clinging of Salvation Army bells, these are the cherished indicators that Yuletide is fast approaching. When the shortest and darkest days of the year are upon us, we look forward to the lift that our Christmas celebrations bring.

All of this is good and has its place in our lives. For most people in America, this is how they prepare for Christmas. Even for those who attend church holiday preparations have come to characterize what the season of Advent has come to mean. Yet, on the surface, it would appear that the interests of the church and the shopping mall are mismatched—the crass Christmas marketing rudely offends the spiritual aspirations of this religious season. Advent is supposed to be a quiet reflective period of spiritual preparation, while Black Friday launches four weeks of noise and commercial activity of the marketplace. The four Sundays in Advent teach us about waiting for God to act in the world, while the rest of the days of the month are devoted to the mad rush of preparing for what Santa will bring us on Christmas morn. The focus and the feel to these two seasons seem to be quite incongruent and incompatible to those of us who want to hold on to the religious meaning of Christmas.

But on another level, these two seasons aren't so different after all. Advent is about waiting; so is Christmas in its more secular form. Both are about anticipating something good to come our way—something to look forward to, something to get excited about, something to embrace and cherish. Even secular forms of Christmas

beckon us to think outside of ourselves into the lives of others, most notably our families and dearest friends, who we remember with some tangible expression for why we love them and, in turn, are loved by them.

But Advent, more than we might realize, is also about tangible expressions of love, waiting for God to enter into our lives and express love to us in meaningful ways, which is why we associate it with the birth of Jesus. The hope of Advent, though, is so much more than the prologue to the Christmas story. It's not just about Jesus. Biblical hope has relevance in virtually every story in the canon of Scripture, if not in most of our lives. At many points in our individual and collective experiences, we're praying and yearning for God to act—to intervene in some troubling situation, to heal a broken life, to take care of our needs, to watch over us with traveling mercies; or in a larger sense, to fulfill the hope for justice, or bring about lasting peace, or granting us another chance at life with some evidence of mercy. All of these are expressions of Advent hope seeking fulfillment in some tangible, concrete, and meaningful way.

Advent, in essence, is to challenge the cynical view that dominates so much of life that what we see and experience is all there is. Its intent is to bring the light of God into the darkest times of our lives. The spirit of this season proclaims to us that there is always something more to life than we might expect; it reminds us that we matter to the One who created us and breathed the spirit of life into our bodies and beings. What's more, it's not just the dream of a better life; it is the fulfillment, the concrete expression, the real

experience that life can be, will be, and is brighter and better than before.

However, unlike our annual preparations for every December 25, the Advent hope ushers us into an alternate sense of time. Instead of calculating it by the clock or the calendar, hope in our lives comes on *kairos* time, the Greek word which refers to fulfillment, completion, and consummation. It's not measured by the calendar, but by the unfolding of events or of the completion of a story. It's a waiting game of anticipation of when things will finally turn around, when they will get better, or when they will come to completion and fulfillment. The signs of these times only become evident to us when the moment draws near.

As I see it, this is how we're to understand today's text from the Gospel. It refers to the suddenness of the *kairos* moment, coming like a thief in the night. Lives will change for the better in a moment's notice; hope will be fulfilled before we even are aware of what it means.

Now, if you're familiar with texts like this one, you'll know they are typically interpreted with the "End Times" in mind, with a presumption that it only refers to when Jesus will return to earth in a final apocalyptic drama with the Second Coming. Usually, this is coupled with a belief in the Rapture, which is where the faithful are to be taken up into the clouds to be with the Lord, while those who will face the terrible apocalypse and wrath of God are "left behind"—hence, the title of the popular series of books and movies based on this reading of Scripture. Thus, the point of Advent is to prepare for the end of the world by looking for signs of Jesus' return.

What underlies all of this is a rather fatalistic view of life—that the world is moving inexorably toward its ultimate demise with a mass destruction of the human race—a hopelessness for the world doomed to judgment except, of course, for “true believers” who conveniently are the sole beneficiaries of a divine escape plan. Thus, verses like,

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...

are read as pointing to the Rapture set up for believers, who are delivered miraculously from the tribulations of the world, while all others are left behind to face them. It’s a popular form of theology in many Christian circles and understandably so, because it’s more about self-preservation and tribal pride than saving the world! There are many Christians out there who are eager to see God judge the world, rather than save it.

The problem is, “End Times” theology is not only largely speculative and misleading, based on no evidence whatsoever other than archaic imagery written from an ancient, pre-Copernican view of the world, it also appeals to the opposite instincts and virtues of what Jesus sought. Jesus wasn’t teaching self-preservation and tribal pride; quite the opposite in his own demonstration of self-sacrifice and human reconciliation and inclusion. Besides, “End Times” theology makes no logical sense. It anticipates the destruction of the very world they claim Christ is supposed to save and return to!

The truth is, the bellicose language and imagery in the texts historically come from the first century period when Judean rebellions continually rose up against Roman imperial rule,

culminating in the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the destruction of the temple. They were never about a global extinction of humanity, but rather the social and political transformation of Judea. The expectation at the time in the early church (which was in its formative stage) was that the destruction of the temple heralded the return of Jesus as the risen Christ and David's Royal Son to finally establish the Kingdom of God in that sacred city. Hence, followers of Jesus were urged to look to the skies and prepare for eternity entering into their lives at any moment. As we know, history tells a different story; this did not happen. So, as history played out, this imagery of a Second Coming of Christ lost its relevance as a literal expectation for that ancient audience.

For that reason, from that time on, passages like these usually have been interpreted metaphorically, i.e., that the coming of Christ is more about the varying ways God enters our lives. The examples of suddenness have to do with the how quickly a *kairos* moment can occur. The central message is this: always be prepared for eternity to enter your life.

For all of us, this message will be relevant, instructive, perhaps challenging, but also comforting. We can prepare for the coming of eternity in an ultimate sense by being cognizant of the temporal nature of human existence—we are fragile beings and our death can occur quickly at any point in life. So we should be prepared. But equally relevant to us is the encouragement we receive to watch and wait for amazing surprises and mercies throughout life. Many situations won't play out like we fear they will; extraordinary mercies occur in everyone's life! Look for them, recall when they've

happened, live for them, and orient yourselves toward that which is hopeful and encouraging! For that is the spirit of eternity entering into our lives purging cynicism from our minds and hearts!

We also prepare for eternity's breaking in by evaluating our lives with a long view, identifying how the ebbs and flows, the ups and downs, often balance out, while anticipating the fulfillment and eventual conclusion of our own personal stories. At the same time, we recognize other storylines in our lives that will come to completion in the interim, which they often do—relationships that begin and end, careers that go through phases, households and families go through changes, as do cultures, political systems, and social expectations and experiences in the world around us. The gloom, sorrows, and worries of life at one moment in time will often unfold to something much brighter, better, and more hopeful. Remember, the dawn always breaks in upon the darkest hours of the night!

All of this is to say: in the spirit of Advent, don't be beholden to a cynical and jaded and miserable view of life. If things seem bad, work to fix them. Anticipate a better future! Trust in the spirit of eternity to help us redeem what seems wrong and celebrate what is good. Affirm the Advent hope by anticipating that something better is yet to come.

This is why the spirit of Advent is so vital for us to embrace. It prepares us for the coming of what is eternal into our lives. Eternity comes to meet us in real time in *kairos* moments—we just have to be spiritually awake to realize and cooperate with them, be aware of when they occur and how to appreciate God's place in them when they do happen.

The Advent hope helps us at every stage of our lives, where we are taught to read time, not just by the clock or calendar, but also in terms of meaning and what our purpose may be. It reminds us that what is, will not always be, and what will be, will be better than the present! It's constantly watching for signs and preparing for eternity to break in and make a difference in our individual and collective lives. That's the spirit that keeps us all moving forward, closer to experiencing what is eternal in the present and anticipating its full realization when God makes all things new.

Author Anne Lamott characterizes Advent hope in this way:

Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: You don't give up.

That's a pretty good summary of what this season of Advent is all about, which may help us deal with the various struggles and disappointments we face at every stage of life. The Spirit of God doesn't just come to us in the month of December, but since this is the darkest month of the year, perhaps that's why the season of Advent does. It brings the light of God to us at our darkest points. It looks ahead on the calendar not only to the birth of the Christ child, but also to the renewal of Spring eternal in our *kairos* moments.

For that reason, the songs of this season and of Advent's promise can be sung with great conviction and joy:

*Hope is a star that shines in the night,
Leading us on till the morning is bright.
When God is a child there's joy in our song.
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,
And none shall be afraid.*

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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