

Therefore Be Ready

A sermon for the first Sunday in Advent

Matt 24:36-44

We look for the signs and the warnings about the weather to come. When we see those huge thunderheads, a storm is coming, maybe hail. Or if it's cold, a blizzard. We look for signs and warnings: What is going to come?

One of the most startling examples of signs and warnings happened in the year 544-545. In the Eastern end of the Mediterranean, the Roman Empire had not fallen. In the first case of recorded history, the Black Death struck from Turkey to Egypt and about 50% of the people died. The Black Death continued in a lesser form until 590. The people said: "Isn't this a sign of the end?"

Forty years later it was easy for Islam to wipe out what was left of Christianity in the Near East and North Africa because the Black Death has wiped out most Christians.

In 1348-1358 the Black Death came again, this time to Western Europe. Again at least 40-50% of the people died. They stacked them up like cord wood. They didn't know why it was happening, and they didn't know what to do. Of course, it must be the end. How could God allow this? This is surely judgment.

In 1618-1648 in the Thirty Years War, the Christians of Northern Europe and the Christians of Southern Europe fought each other and about 40% of the people were killed. This was not the Black Death, but war. What kind of judgment was this? What kind of God? What kind of future?

This is the kind of thing the text is talking about in Matthew 24. What are the signs of what is coming? It was actually much more difficult and confusing in the First Century. About 30 AD, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, God truly came and died and rose again. The Old Age is over; it is finished. The New Age has come. In Isaiah 49:13 it says: "I will do something new." Not like going back to Eden. It's new "new." God himself came. There has been nothing like it, and there is nothing like it. We have no categories.

And then nothing happened. People went on living. There were a few miracles. Nothing happened.

People asked: What is God's plan? Is he coming again? About twenty years later the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 wrote: "For this we declare you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep." ("Fallen asleep" is Paul's way of saying that people have died in the Lord.) They obviously had had a big debate as to whether those who were still alive when the Lord came would have an advantage over those who had been buried and would have

to rise from their graves. Paul points out, "No." This is going to be the same for everyone. But we can see that they understood that the Lord was coming in their generation.

Then about 68-69 AD. Paul wrote again in 1 Cor 15:51: "Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." The end was coming very soon. It is indicated in a less direct way in Mark 9:1: "Truly I say to you, there are many standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." (See also Matt 10:23.)

Then Jerusalem, the city of David, fell in 70 AD. It is said in Roman history (not just in Luke 21:8) that the Romans didn't leave one stone upon another. A later writing reflects on this: "First of all, you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation'" (2 Peter 3:3-4). Nothing happened.

The author of Second Peter goes on in 2 Peter 3:8 (quoting Psalm 90:4): "One day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." Then 2 Peter 3:10 continues: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief"

In a similar way in Rev 6:9-11 it talks about the saints who are already in the Lord. It says they are "under the altar." How long, O Lord? The answer comes in Rev 6:11: The number of those who are martyrs is not complete. How do we understand this? How does the Lord work? Not according to our calculations.

It is similar for us today. We have a reason to scoff at those who say: "We know the time and the seasons." We do the same thing when trouble comes: "Lord, you need to do the things that I am describing to you. You have to do it my way." Usually that means putting the Lord into the role of Santa Claus.

It is worth looking at what Luther put in the Small Catechism in his second and third petitions to the Lord's Prayer. Luther writes:

"Thy kingdom come."

What does this mean?

Answer: To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us. How is this done? Answer: When the heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word and live a godly life, both here in time and hereafter forever.

"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

What does this mean?

Answer: To be sure, the good and gracious will of God is done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also be done by us.

How is the done?

Answer: When God curbs and destroys every evil counsel and purpose of the devil, of the world, and of our flesh which would hinder us from hallowing his name and prevent the coming of his kingdom, and when he strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his Word and in faith even to the end. This is his good and gracious will.

All of this stands over against the popular Lutheran slogan of our day: "God's work, our hands." Because as Luther points out, it's really "God's work, God's hands."

What? You mean it's not up to us?!

This comes back to asking: What sign does God give us? Both in Matthew 16:4 and the parallel in Luke 11:29 it says an evil generation seeks a sign and there will be only one sign, the sign of Jonah (Matt 16:4), that of course is to speak of the One who died and rose again.

In Mark 8:13 it even says there will be no sign. It's really about how the Lord does it. How is that? In a remarkable way in the Old Testament pointed to this by saying: "Wait." In Isaiah 64:4: "No one has seen a God like you who works for those who wait for him."

Then in the more familiar lines of Isaiah 40:30-31: "Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Paul speaks of that in 1 Corinthians 1: "For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:22-23). Then Paul goes on (1 Cor 1:26-28):

"For consider your call. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Amen