

Advent 1A 2016 Sermon

Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus said to the disciples, "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 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, 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 unexpected hour."

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For some of you, this passage may bring to mind the series of books written between 1995 and 2007 called the "*Left Behind*" series. Co-written by theologian Tim LaHaye and novelist Jerry Jenkins, they became best-sellers; largely, I think, because the writing skills of Jerry Jenkins made them page-turners of the first order, *and* because the **theme** of the series – the end of the world and the *judgment* concerning who **will** or will **not** be saved – has an endless appeal to a great many people, some simply because they find it fascinating and others because it scares the bejeebers out of them regarding their own salvation. As is often the case when a book with a Christian theme becomes popular, much of the general public *assumed* that the Christian perspective depicted in those books was the *only* Christian interpretation there **is** regarding Bible passages such as today's Gospel; whereas in reality, Tim LaHaye's perspective represents but a **small** percentage of the many interpretations of today's Gospel and similar passages. For those who are interested, LaHaye's perspective is called a dispensationalist, pretribulation, premillennial perspective of the end of the world.¹ Suffice it to say that a large majority of Christians worldwide do NOT hold that perspective.

Now I will admit that at first glance today's Gospel seems to describe what LaHaye and others term "the Rapture." One of two men in the field and one of two women grinding meal is "taken" (though the text never says what that means.) But there are some *problems* with LaHaye's interpretation, and one of them is the fact that Jesus makes no distinction between the outward activities of the two people in the field or the two women grinding meal. Fr. John Shea writes:

"*Both* men, the one 'taken' into the kingdom and the one left behind, are out in the field. *Both* women, the one 'taken' into the kingdom and the one left behind,

are grinding at the mill. It is not that one is out in the field and the other is praying, or that one is grinding at the mill and the other is in the temple. ...

“So where is the difference between these two men and women? If both are doing the same things, why is one taken and one left?”

“The text does not explicitly consider this question. But the **context** suggests that *inner* vigilance and awareness make the difference. On the visible, **outer** level both men and both women are the same. Therefore, the difference *must* be interior. It must be on the level of awareness...

Keep **awake** therefore [Jesus says], 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 unexpected hour.

“The event called ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ is now also... called ‘the day of the Lord.’ ... [And] everything hinges on how ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ and ‘the day of the Lord’ is understood. A *literal* approach [such as we see in the ‘*Left Behind*’ series] sees it as the cosmic coming of an end-time figure in an *outer, visible* way to judge the living and dead. ... We cannot prepare for this judgment at the last minute for we do not know when the last minute will be. Therefore, enlightened self-interest would dictate ongoing, scrupulous observance.

“...[But w]hen the second coming does **not** come, it is difficult to stay poised and waiting.”²

We human beings are not constructed in such a way that one can be continually alert for some outward event to occur – be it the possibility of a thief coming in the middle of the night, or the physical return of Jesus. If we stay awake all night, every night, preparing for a possible burglary, we will not sleep. Even if a family takes turns watching through the night – the father takes the first shift, the mother the second, the teenage child the third – after a year or so, the family will begin to think, “You know, the possibility of a thief coming is slim to none,” and they will give up the effort. Our brains are also constructed in such a way as to ignore a stimulus that is *always* present. When our High School tennis team played against Riverside-Brookfield High School, which was built right next to the famous Brookfield Zoo, the smell of the zoo on the tennis courts was overpowering, and I wondered how the Riverside-Brookfield students could *stand* going to school every day. The answer lies in the human brain in a phenomenon called “olfactory fatigue,” which means that if a smell is constantly present, our brain learns to ignore it. The same “fatigue” is experienced with our other senses – sight, hearing, taste, etc. I can’t help but think that if Christians were constantly watching for the Rapture to come, they would eventually suffer from “Rapture Expectation Fatigue.” Do you remember when the *Left Behind* series first came out there were bumper stickers on cars everywhere saying, “In case of rapture,

this car will be unmanned?” Where are those bumper stickers now? They’ve disappeared, victims of Rapture Expectation Fatigue.

So Jesus **cannot** mean that “being awake” or “alert” means an outward looking for his *physical* return; it *has* to be that he is talking about an *interior* alertness. Fr. Shea writes, “[T]he coming of the Son of Man’ and ‘the day of the Lord’... can be interpreted as symbolic code for God's invitation into the fullness of human life through Christ. The Lord is eternally present to human life, creating, judging, redeeming, and calling it to fullness. However, we are often not *aware* of this permeating divine activity. When... God's redeeming presence enters human consciousness, it **is** ‘the day of the Lord’, and the ‘Son of Man’ has arrived.”³

“But Mark,” you may be asking, “isn’t keeping constant *interior* alertness just as difficult as outwardly waiting for Jesus’ *exterior*, physical return? What’s the difference?” The difference is that those waiting for Jesus’ *physical* return are looking for a onetime event happening outside themselves, an event for which people have been waiting now for almost 2000 years; while those waiting *interiorly* for “the coming of the Son of Man” are rewarded *at least* from time to time, if not quite frequently. The Son of Man comes in a breath-taking rainbow, the giggle of a baby, the forgiveness of an offense. The Son of Man comes in the form of bread and wine, welcoming the stranger, heartfelt prayer, and holy silence.

But being interiorly *awake* to the coming of the Son of Man here and now is easier said than done, especially at this time of the year. “Spiritual traditions always warn people about becoming lost in the world,” writes Fr. Shea... “The demands of everyday life are merciless. There is always **more** to do and not enough time to do it...

“What is the world like? The answer of [today’s Gospel] story is that it is a place of forgetfulness. Or, in the metaphor of Matthew's text, it is a place where we fall asleep. We do not stay attentive to the spiritual dimension of life. Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in the field, and grinding at the mill take **all** our time and, more importantly, take **all** our mind. When this happens, we find ourselves lacking passion, purpose, and pleasure. ...

“This dominance of everyday activity is particularly true in the Christmas season. Already busy people become busier. They have to prepare for the season, which often means **more** shopping and more work. Unfortunately, this frantic preparation often puts people to sleep spiritually. People begin to long not for the birth of the Christmas Christ, but for the [relief of the] lazy, doldrums days of January. *The rush of the season works against the message of the season.*
(REPEAT)

“...We wrongly treat spirit as a luxury,” Fr. Shea continues. “If our *bodies* are hurting, we will pay attention to them and work hard to recover our physical health. If our financial security or social status is under attack, we will struggle and fight ceaselessly for our money and position. But we will allow our spirit to languish and even atrophy...

“How are we to keep spiritually aware in the midst of everyday activity? How are we to keep awake while working in the field and grinding at the mill? This is not easy. We may have the desire, but we may lack the know-how....”⁴

That’s where spiritual practices come in. If you do not already have a regular spiritual practice, then finding one and keeping it will be the most important step you could possibly take. If your current practice has grown cold, perhaps it is time for a new one. If you need help, I can offer some suggestions.

Fr. Shea writes: “Some friends of mine... suggest smuggling spiritual exercises into the world of work. A Jewish doctor says a Hebrew prayer of purification every time she washes her hands. She explains that the prayer is not meant to *purify* but to remind her that the person she is treating is more than their disease. In other words, she stays awake to the **spiritual** dimension of people *while* she attends to their bodily distress.

“A man pauses before a Christmas tree in the building where he works. He brings to mind the connection between heaven and earth and ponders the... truth that creation is grounded in God. He says that as long as he holds onto this truth, his day goes better. ‘I notice more,’ he says. ‘I see the deeper sides of people. And I’m more patient, and respectful.’ The awareness of Spirit brings pleasure, passion, and purpose.

“Spiritual exercises help us ‘stay awake through the night.’ [For me, the daily practice of Centering Prayer is **essential**. Your] exercises may [come from] the rituals and prayers of [our] faith tradition... But they may also be home grown practices. Personal ‘things’ we have learned to cultivate in order to stay focused on the deeper dimension of life.”⁵ My friends, we don’t have to wait another 2,000 or 2 billion years for Jesus’ physical return. The Lord is always present; we simply need to be present – awake – to the Lord. And a daily spiritual practice can help keep us awake and open to the God who is always among us.

AMEN

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind

² John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, pp. 26-27

³ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29