

May 21, 2011. That day might sound like any other day, but it was announced to be the day ushering in the end of the world. In the months leading up to May, hundreds of billboards across America read "Judgement Day" with the date in bold letters. This date was publicized by the Family Radio network, and it was based on the calculation of the network's president, Harold Camping. He was an evangelist who claimed that his years of Bible study and numerology ^{expertise} brought him to this discovery, but an obvious problem presented itself: The world didn't end on that day. Millions of dollars were wasted to promote this prediction, but Camping didn't back down after this embarrassment. He claimed that he had reviewed and revised the date after further study, and the true date for the world's end was October 21, 2011. Again, as we know from being here ten years past that date, his apocalyptic vision didn't arrive, so he took his own advice and repented ^{of his behavior}

Camping offered an extensive apology to his audience and stated his predictions were sinful. He said that he was reading Scripture even more fervently now, not find to dates, but to be more faithful. In acknowledging his errors, Camping said that he should've listened to his fellow Christians who lifted up Matthew 24:36, which we heard today: ""But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Jesus says these words toward the end of ministry, and these words paint a vivid description of the end of all things: Once Noah is named, we might anticipate that there will be disaster, dread, and darkness, with some people taken and some left behind. It's easy to see how our fears could be quickly activated in hearing this passage. We are experts in visualizing the worst ^{edge} scenario, but before our imagination runs wild, we need to focus on the speaker. It's Jesus, the one who has repeatedly told his disciples, "Do not fear," so perhaps we can take a step back and see this scene in a different light. We might embrace the humility evident in Jesus as he says that no one knows for certain about the end except God the Father. We might view this passage as a reflection on what is ultimately worthwhile, being attentive to the Lord, rather than a gameplan for Armageddon. Perhaps we can welcome these words of Jesus as an invitation rather than a threat.

Advent is the Church's invitation to prepare for the arrival of our Lord Jesus, from his birth in Bethlehem until his return in glory. Advent is a season of the Church, not a countdown until Christmas. In fact, Advent marks the beginning of the Church year, and it is a time that encompasses history and mystery: We remember and renew our hearts, ^{trusting} in expectation of God's love revealed in Jesus. It might sound strange to hear an apocalyptic message from Jesus on the first Sunday of Advent, but it has a function. It aims to drive out a common sentiment spread throughout our consumer culture, and that sentiment is nostalgia. Nostalgia is preoccupied with a pleasant picture of the past, while Advent affirms that nostalgia is not enough to fulfill our deepest desires. We need a vision that can hold all of our memories, good, bad, and ugly, and only hope can offer real support when faced with real challenges. The author Anne Lamott observed that, "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." Advent allows us space for this waiting and watching as disciples of Jesus, and as we do these things, we are joined more fully to the hope that is in us.

Instead of a threat, Jesus offers us a blessing in this passage about not knowing and the days of Noah. He says that no one knows about the end, neither angels nor Jesus himself, so we don't need to worry about not knowing everything. We don't have to have everything figured out to be a disciple. In fact, Jesus cautions us against authorities who do. We are only asked to be mindful about our lives and Jesus' words, and when these realities are aligned, grace abounds. By making decisions in view of our destination, the kingdom of God, we grow in faith and hope. Jesus calls us to accept that we will not know the secrets of God even as disciples for one major reason: We are human beings, fragile and finite, and once we accept that we have limits, we have freedom. With Jesus' blessing, we are unbound from unrealistic standards, and we are assured that our witness ^{has infinite worth} ~~is worthwhile~~. Jesus' encouragement to stay awake is not a threat to those who are tired; it is a promise to those who are troubled.

This promise testifies that all of our time is sacred. The days of Noah mentioned in today's passage are not extraordinary; actually, Jesus is highlighting that God shows up right in the middle of daily life, eating and drinking, while we're at work, and that normalcy can be holy when we keep awake. Judgment is a part of the story of Noah, too, but judgment can be good news. In the Bible, judgment is seen as setting things right and restoring God's creation, and judgment is warranted in view of the violence and sin that beset our world. By keeping awake in the days of Noah, we call out what needs healing and justice in our day-to-day world.

Keeping awake in Advent might sound like a generic activity, but today's passage is part of a larger portion in Matthew's Gospel ^{which} that shows that ~~our~~ watchfulness is united to our witness. Ethics are integral to Jesus' vision of all things past, present, and future, and the joy of keeping awake ^{shines forth} is ~~uncovered~~ in Matthew Chapter 25:31-40. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, we hear the blessed say to Jesus, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Advent ^{aims} to shake ^{to the truth} us awake that life is precious and ^{full of purpose} purposeful, and in today's Gospel passage, we learn that the date of the world's end is ultimately irrelevant if we abide in God's love.

Belief: I believe that God bids us to seek him in love, not in some guessing game about end times.

Hope: I hope that people know that you don't have to have things figured out to be a Christian and that time is blessed whenever we give ourselves to love.

InvTx: Be ready with expectation.