

**“LEFT STANDING”**  
**First Sunday in Advent, December 1, 2019**  
**Matthew 24:36-44**

*Matthew’s community had their bags packed and their hopes up for a long time, expecting the return of the Master, their Shepherd, the one who would save them from their oppression and depression. But pray hard as they might, he did not come. What were they to think about him? Matthew, borrowing from Mark’s Gospel, entreats the early believers to keep the faith that Jesus will return to free them, to establish God’s Kingdom on Earth. From chapter 24: beginning with the 36<sup>th</sup> verse, Matthew imagines Jesus telling his disciples to stay strong, even though he must soon leave them. It is the First Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of Hope. Hear what the Gospel writer Matthew is promising the people of God:*

[Jesus continued his teaching:] “But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows.

“The Arrival of the Son of Man will take place in times like Noah’s. Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing—until the flood hit and swept everything away.

“The Son of Man’s Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind. So stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up.

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

Welcome to Advent! Headlong we go into the Christmas season in America. Here in our own backyard, we got a 14” or maybe 2’ snow-dose of reality-check this past week. Thanksgiving celebrations were made difficult due to the short work week and hazardous travel in the air and on our highways. Some didn’t even get to where they were going; others took an

impossibly long time to get there, only to wolf down their Thanksgiving meal, give hugs all around, and pile back into cars for the long trek home.

It's Advent and Christmas is but a mere 24 days away. How does that happen?

We talk about Advent as a *season* followed by the Christmas *season*. We Christians put a lot of energy into these seasons. Our sanctuary is lovely—festive, brightly-lit, sporting a new garland up to and back down from our wreath. Thank you, Sophia Women! And special thanks to Denise and Randy Mann and all their elves for the Hanging of the Greens effort last Sunday! We will have these decorations up through Christmas and until Stock Show, and then down they will come, and we will be nearly into Easter season. How does *that* happen? As my younger sister proclaimed when she was but a wee lassie, “We just gave birth to Baby Jesus, and now we are killing him!”

We have our seasons, and with Advent comes a change in our Gospel storytellers: we leave Luke behind for a few lectionary seasons and pick up Matthew. We leave our Social Justice Historian Luke, a writer directly concerned about love and justice for the poor, the outcast, and the marginalized, and enter into the voice of Matthew, the Jewish Teacher.

Matthew is big on big speeches. In his Gospel, Jesus gives five major lectures, all designed to get his hearers to understand the kingdom of heaven, all designed to raise spiritual awareness through historical comparison with the ancient Jewish experience of Yahweh God. In Matthew, Jesus is often billed as the Second Moses. Matthew's stories of Jesus parallel the story of the first Moses: exile in Egypt, killing of infants, and mountaintop experiences. When you hear or read Matthew's Gospel, you will do well to remember Jewish Old Testament lore.

Back to the seasons. I find it curious that in this Season A of Advent, rather than feeding us with a scripture passage of hope, the Lectionary talking heads take us to apocalyptic literature. Odd. Here at UCC Parker Hilltop, we enjoy our bright Christmas lights and hopeful liturgy. We sing the familiar hymn, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” and we bring fire to our altar as a symbol of God’s everlasting faithfulness.

I attended a Celtic Spirituality Retreat this past week. Now, I am no expert on Celtic spiritual thought, but one or two things I learned I want to share with you.

In Celtic tradition, all of life is viewed in terms of cycles. The beginning is winter’s cycle. In winter, where Creation above the ground is dormant, there is vibrant, sustaining life below. The roots of trees nourish each other. Insects and burrowing animals populate the underground, sustaining with their busywork new life and new growth. Water seeps and greedy life drinks; earth refreshes and oxygenates while taking a rest from being trampled and moved about; systems regenerate and ready themselves for life above the crusty earth come spring. In the winter cycle, we above-ground dwellers look East, straining for the sunrise. We stand in the West in the darkness and quiet of winter, hopeful for a glimpse of the sun’s light, eager to feel its much-needed warmth.

What a lovely image! Following the big snow last week, I was outside walking Kona or shoveling along behind Chris, who was doing the lion’s share of the snow removal. Later in the day, I drove down Highway 83 to La Foret and marveled at the frosty trees and whitewashed prairie land. I lifted my face when the sun made an appearance through the clouds. Even if it was just for a moment or two, my skin sought the sun’s healing. My mind needed to clear of worry and anxiety, and my heart needed to

experience hope. As Dostoevsky wrote, “The human person without hope is dead.”

We want for a hopeful Advent, but the Lectionary pulls us into the foreboding judgment of the apocalypse. Arggh!

Tim La Haye and his pal, Jerry Jenkins, made a fortune off of the apocalypse. Between them, they wrote over 200 books and pamphlets, the most famous of them being the 16 novels, 4 screenplays, several PC computer games, comic books, and Teen versions of the *Left Behind* series, which had a top-selling shelf life between 1995 and 2007. They made millions and millions of dollars off of fearmongering, pandering mostly to the very persons who idolized them already and who accepted lock, stock, and barrel their Evangelical “saved” Christians-yay! and boo! everyone else fantasy theology.

I read some of these books, stories in which, as Michelle Goldberg writes, “people disappear and things blow up.” They are, if nothing else, entertaining. If you don’t know about this series, it is set in current times along a premise that a theological event called the “rapture” has taken place in the history of the world. True and deserving Christian believers, i.e. Evangelical fundamentalists, have already been instantly taken up by God to heaven, and everyone else left on earth: your average Protestants-including UCCers, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Methodists- Catholics, Greek Orthodox, most people of color, all LGBTQ persons, all Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists, Agnostics, Spiritualists, Quakers, Mormons, Native American spiritualists, and the *very threatening* Aborigine folk, are left behind on a demolished, smoking, inhospitable Earth, fated for unspecified transgressions to experience for seven years God’s vengeful.

Jerry Falwell, a bastion of contemporary evangelical cultural authority, said of the “Left Behind” series that, “In terms of its impact on Christianity, it’s probably greater than any other book in modern times, outside the Bible.” Go, Jerry. Truly, I hope you, LaHaye, and Jenkins are the first “true Christians” to be taken in the Rapture.

It was supposed to have happened in 1994. Harold Camping, founder of the extreme fundamentalist Family Radio Network, predicted the end of the world. When 1994 came and went, he spent millions of dollars of his own and the life savings of many of his followers on billboards and advertisements proclaiming the Rapture Day to now be May 21, 2011. Think about that for a minute. I wonder what Jesus would say about a minister who has made a veritable mint off of fear theology.

One believer, documentary filmmaker Robert Fitzgerald, was interviewed on a NY Street that day. He declared that 97% of the world’s population would die. He had invested his entire financial worth to buy print advertisement for Judgment Day, lamenting, “I didn’t water my plants this morning; I didn’t wash off my dishes. I didn’t expect to be back home this evening.”

May 21, 2011 came and went, and Camping announced that the time of Tribulation had, indeed, started, but it would be another 5 months until the world would actually face its violent end, placing the prediction back to October 21, 2011. Harold Camping and Tim LaHaye both died two years later, never having their vision fulfilled. The world did not end as they prophesied.

But what about Matthew? Why did the three synoptic writers—Matthew, Mark, and Luke- include these apocalyptic stories in their Gospels? Again, I point you to the context of the times: It is about 70 CE, or 40 years after Jesus no longer walked the earth. Matthew had the

benefit of Mark's writing of a few years earlier, but he knew nothing of Paul, writing 20 years before Mark. Mark loved to write about the mystical Jesus, the hidden Jesus, one who says often, "this is God's truth, but don't tell anyone I said it." Apocalyptic prediction fits right in with mysticism.

These writers were addressing an audience of new Christians of the Way, many of them pagan converts without any grounding in Jewish theological history. Dr. Sea Raven in her book, *Theology of Exile: The Year of Matthew*, speaks of the context of these apocalyptic writings:

Christianity got trapped into a kind of permanent state of alienation when the original faith community that knew Jesus died and the major interpreter of the meaning of Jesus' life and teachings—Paul, and his followers and the members of the early Christian communities also died, without seeing [the restoration of a return to a true Jewish homeland and God's restoration of justice and compassion.]

The idea of a second coming and a final judgment at the end of time took hold, especially when the writer of Mark's Gospel saw the sacking of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the disintegration of Jewish national identity. Clearly, God had no intention of acting to restore anything. But that kind of despair is not conducive to sustainable human life, and so Matthew borrowed from Mark's [apocalyptic imagination.]

Over the centuries, Matthew's admonition to the remnant Christians to keep growing and building in faith has become a "pious maxim supporting a puritanical emphasis on a morality" defined by "the right kind of Christian fundamentalists" at the expense of the rest of the unenlightened and rejected world.

But suppose that instead of "terrorizing ourselves with the Advent of violent judgment," we were to superimpose a theology of hopefulness that Jesus' birth might symbolize new life and endless possibility, a celebration of the human Christ consciousness, where we abandon, after 2000 years,

the mistaken prediction that Christ is coming again. Instead of mourning Christ's death and God's seeming indifference to our plight in the world, how about we celebrate Christ's birth and with it the rebirth of the values of justice and compassion?

Jesus is not coming again to save us from ourselves. We must do that. We stand in the winter and look to the East. Sure enough each morning, the sun we *can* count on rises from its darkness to light and warm the world. The sun that sustains life on Earth is called forth each day by God-Alive who created the heavens and the earth and all that dwells therein. We can count on it. Jesus is not coming again, as much as we hold hope against hope.

*We are, we are coming again, born and sent out from the comfort of our mother's womb to love one another as we have been unconditionally loved. We look ahead to the dawning of Christmas; we are called again this Advent-tide to look in upon a crude manger and see reflected in the eyes of the newborn babe the hope of all humanity. He is and we are. No country club membership required. No litmus tests for inclusion in God's heart. No saving a select few for eternal life and condemning all others to hell's fires. We are all children of the Beloved, and we are loved equally and completely and eternally as we are.*

You can put that on a big, honking billboard, You can take that to the bank.

*May It Be So.*