

## The R's of Advent: Readiness Mathew 24: 36-44

The Advent season is upon us; it is a time of preparation, expectation and celebration of the coming of Christ. If we are not careful, we will overlook many of the blessings of the season that God sends for our benefit during this hectic and frenzied time of the year. The Gospel of Mathew is one of those blessings, one of the many that will help us to replace stress and anxiety with peace and joy. It is my prayer that this series of messages from Mathew's Gospel entitled "The Rs of Advent" will help equip us to do that for the glory of God. They center upon four "r" words, readiness, repentance, relationship and routine. The emphasis this morning is on readiness and preparation.

Are you ready for Christmas? Most of us will be asked that question at least once in the next 24 days before Christmas officially arrives and we typically rattle off a list of things we have done or still need to do before December 25<sup>th</sup>. But which Christmas are we preparing for? Is it the Christmas where we celebrate the humble birth of the Messiah, the Son of God, or is it the glitzy and flashy Christmas, the one where stores put up holiday trees in October and people compete with their neighbors to put up the largest number of outdoor decorations, which likely won't include a manger scene or star? Are we preparing for the joyful season of giving, or the material Christmas, the one where we exchange gift cards with each other because we already have everything else? Will it be a Christmas of joyful celebration or the compulsory Christmas, the one where we are obliged to attend parties with relatives, friends and coworkers that we barely speak to the rest of the year?

In just a few generations Christmas has become more of a secular holiday than a religious Holy Day. Christmas began when early Christians took the words of Malachi 4:2 literally, **But to you who fear My name, the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings**, and transformed a pagan holiday known as Sol Invictus into a celebration we now call Christmas. Some would say that Christmas has now reverted to its roots of that ancient celebration, a pagan festival that marked the beginning of the Winter Solstice, where a burning ball of fire called the Sun triumphed over darkness.

Which Christmas are we preparing for? Which Son are we celebrating? The sun of the sky which brings us light and warmth or the Son of God, which brings hope, peace and joy? When someone asks me if I am ready for that Christmas, the real Christmas where the coming of Christ is central to the celebration, I am eager to respond yes. I look forward to the advent candles, the manger scene, advent and Christmas music and even Christmas cookies. The real Christmas is the one where we not only celebrate the birth of our Savior but the one where eagerly await His return. Are you ready for the real Christmas? Isn't that the question Jesus is asking each one of us here this morning via those verses in Mathew? **The question for us in this holy time of the year is simply this- have you prepared your head and your heart for Christ to come?**

It is something we need to do for 2 reasons: we know when Jesus was born, when He died and when He was resurrected for the dead, and we don't know when He will return. We know the approximate date and time of the birth of Christ from information contained in the Scriptures and nonbiblical sources. In fact, our whole calendar is based upon it. The terms BC and AD refer to the period before and after Christ's birth, even though there is now a concerted effort by liberal scholars to replace them with the terms CE and BCE. We can know the date of Christ's birth and the date of his death and resurrection, but God only knows the date of His return. Verse 36 reveals that the exact time of His second coming is not for us to know, yet in His grace God has given us some signs as to when it *might* occur.

Signs are an important part of our lives. They are meant to provide information, give us direction and perhaps even warn us of impending danger. Think for a moment of all the signs you have already seen this morning. If you drove here, you probably saw road signs that provide necessary information to safely navigate your vehicle to your destination. Since we live in Northern Ohio, you likely also saw orange road signs, warning of possible hazards ahead. You likely saw signs identifying businesses, churches and buildings, and information such as how much a gallon of gas will cost. You may have noticed our new church sign, identifying us and inviting everyone from our community to join us. Entering the church, you may have noticed signs directing you to the Holy Grounds Café or the church office. Signs are everywhere.

**The problem is that we can get so used to seeing them, we tend to ignore them after a while.** We think that we already know what we need to know, so we intentionally or sometimes unintentionally ignore their message with tragic results. Little has changed, for it was much the same in the days of Noah. Look with me at verses 37-39. Though there were no traffic signs, or signs with the price of gas posted on them, there were other signs providing vital information. One of them came in the form of a great big boat. We know from Genesis 6 that God was angry because “the earth was filled with violence”. (6:11) God commanded Noah to build a boat 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. Based on those measurements, the ark would have had approximately 1,500,000 cubic feet of free space. The ark would be equivalent in volume to 522 standard American railroad stock cars, each of which can hold 240 sheep, or for that matter 240 people. If you do the math there was enough room for than 125,288 people. Yet when the ship sailed there were only 8 people aboard.

God commanded Noah to build that huge ship, on dry land, on the side of a mountain, hundreds of miles from the nearest large body of water. If that wasn't a sign of something to come, nothing was. People ignored the sign, and likely saw Noah as the village idiot. They were so consumed with their everyday routines of life that they were oblivious to the message that God was sending them through the prophet. Life seemed normal, until they were caught by surprise by the sudden storm which would soon consume them and their possessions.

I mentioned earlier that God has given us some signs that Christ's return is imminent. If you are curious about what they are, I encourage you to read and study the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mathew for yourself. You will soon find that it is possible for Christ to return at any moment. The question is- are you ready to meet him?

Look with me at verses 40 and 41. Some will be taken and some will be left. It speaks of people who are prepared and people who are unprepared. It speaks of people who know Christ, and pray for His return, and of those who do not. **Those who are prepared, those who seek to know Christ, will be taken, and those who are unprepared, those who don't know Christ, will be left.** God only knows who they are and how that will take place.

Elsewhere in Scripture, there is additional information about that time that will allow us to formulate a couple of theories about how that play out, but for now we will just have to be prepared to wait and see how God will work. During this season of watching and waiting and preparing let us be ready for Christ's appearance. Let us observe the signs of the time and prepare our homes, prepare our hearts, and pray for God by His grace to have mercy on our souls, for it is in the hope of the second coming of Jesus we pray. Amen