

# Backing into the Future

Matthew 24: 36-44

It was a wake-up call to people stuck in the present. Jesus was telling them to live in the present with hope in the future! He knew the sign of hope for the people was the coming of God's long-promised Messiah. Speculation was everywhere. Who's the Messiah? Do you think this is the one? Jesus tells them, "But about that day and hour no one knows." The coming of God's Messiah is a subject that is not known -- can't be known. The future is in the mind of God. It is beyond human, and even angelic, comprehension. So don't even bother speculating about that future, but live now with your eyes open!

Jesus then said something else interesting. He said that way back in Noah's days, people were just living their lives. "They knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away." This is not a judgment on those people, but just a picture of men, women, and children caught up in life. There were no signs of coming disaster and then, suddenly, the end. Jesus was warning his listeners about the danger of not paying attention to how you're living -- of ignoring the bigger picture of your life.

Jesus used another example. There are two men working in the field. One is taken and one left. Two women are grinding meal together. One is taken and one left. Contrary to the interpretation of some evangelical eschatologists, the ones taken are not *raptured*, not taken to be with Jesus until the end of the age. They are swept away like those in the flood. How suddenly and unexpectedly life can end!

Jesus' audience was people worn down by life. They were stuck in the present tense of living. They were poor and living hand to mouth. The future held no great hope for them. There was really no bigger picture for them, but only a continually grinding poverty, unrelenting injustice, and early death. Ironically, these people stuck in the present held the flickering hope of a coming Messiah. For some, this hope was intense, but it was very narrow in its context. The Messiah would throw off the Roman oppressors and return Jerusalem to the kingdom like David's. You might call that "backing into the future," looking forward to things the way they used to be. But the future is not returning to the past, Jesus insisted. The early church proclaimed this in the gospels. God is doing a new thing!

It's getting darker this time of year. These are days of deepening darkness with less and less sunlight. Primitive man watched in terror each year as the life giving sun gave way to the dark and cold of approaching winter. You can imagine the relief with which they celebrated the days that daylight began to increase. You can understand why the early church chose that celebration of returning light to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

The first century, when Jesus lived, was a time of darkness. People suffered under the oppression of Roman occupation with little hope of dawn. The New Testament described Jesus as the light of the world because he gave them hope. He brought light to people's lives and helped people see God.

The message of Advent is “Wake up!” “Celebrate the coming of the light of the world!” “Light the candles and kindle the flame of anticipation!” Advent means Jesus is coming. This is the first in a series of Advent sermons with the shared theme: “Jesus as the parable of God.” What is a parable? It is a story designed to reveal something about the nature of God, what the Bible calls the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. A parable, however, reveals its meaning only when the listener actually enters the story. You have to find yourself in the parable in order to find its meaning. We have to enter into the life Jesus reveals in order to find the meaning of what he taught and lived. Jesus tells us that we have to find God within ourselves and we have to find ourselves within God before we can understand who God is for us. We will see when we believe and Jesus shows us a pathway to follow. This is how Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Many of the people Jesus talked to were stuck in the present. The challenge many of us face today is actually to live in the present. We tend to waste time and energy being stuck in the past. We carry a lot of guilt around with us. We carry blame or shame. We spend ourselves constantly reworking what is past and that keeps us from living in the present. To those who are stuck living in the past, your gift this year is to let that go. Lay down that burden and live in the present.

It may be that many of us are stuck living in the future. We tend to waste time and energy worrying about what might happen. It is important to prepare for the future, but it is destructive to live there, to plan obsessively and therefore to miss being present to our own lives. To those who are stuck living in the future, your gift this year is to let that go. Lay down that burden and live in the present. The Spirit calls us to be present to life today without being stuck here. There is more to life than the daily grind. There are lessons to be learned from the past and there is hope as we look to the future, but now is the time for living.

A group from Crossroads went with the contingent from Kansas City’s MORE2 organization to a very special Presidential forum in Des Moines, Iowa yesterday. The theme of the forum was Community Values. All the candidates were invited, though not all attended. Person after person brought stories and questions to the Presidential candidates. They shared real needs and real pain. They called for action now. Candidate after candidate responded by calling all of us not to live by fear, but to dare to hope. The Spirit calls us not to live by fear, but to live with hope, to live with compassion, and to work for justice and peace.

The message of Advent is “Be awake” to the needs and the possibilities of today! Be awake to the call of the Spirit today. Be awake to the potential of your lives today. At Washington’s National Cathedral, on March 31, 1968 – five days before he was killed -- Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke these words:

I am sure that most of you have read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled "Rip Van Winkle." The one thing that we usually remember about the story is that Rip Van Winkle slept twenty years. But there is another point in that little story that is almost completely overlooked. It was the sign in the end, from which Rip went up in the mountain for his long sleep.

When Rip Van Winkle went up into the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George the Third of England. When he came down twenty years later the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington — and looking at the picture he was amazed — he was completely lost. He knew not who he was.

And this reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history — and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution. And one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.

Let us be awake to what is going on around us and what can happen through us today. We are preparing to celebrate Christmas, to celebrate Jesus' life – the past. We are living in hope of the coming Kingdom of God, an age of peace that is emerging but not yet fully visible – not clearly evident. We are called to live as the presence of Christ now. We face the challenge to live as parables of Jesus. As people touch this congregation, this community, let them experience the meaning of Jesus. It has been said, “Be the peace you seek.” Let us be the Christ we follow. Let us face the future with hope and courage, and not back into it out of fear. This is not the time to sleep through a revolution. Wake up and live!