

Born the King
The Unexpected Hour

Matthew 24:36-44

1. Focus on what we are called to

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Born the King **The Unexpected Hour** *Matthew 24:36-44*

The Christmases when I was growing up in my house could be called “traditional-commercial.” What I mean by that is, we celebrated with decorations, music, and the exchange of gifts – all the stuff you’d see in popular culture, but it wasn’t really religious in any way, unless the TV shows or songs we listened to happened to be about that. But I remember our next door neighbors had a bit more religion to work with than we had, and they had a decorative box full of little numbered drawers, 1-25. It was an Advent calendar. I had never seen one before, but I was over at their house so I asked what it was. They said that every day, you would open the drawer and there would be a little piece of candy to enjoy each day. This made no sense to me. Who filled the drawers? Santa? Elves? And if each drawer had just *one* piece of candy in it, why in the world would you have to wait to open them one at a time? Couldn’t you just open them all and eat all the candy and get it over with? And if you did, would you go on Santa’s naughty list? I couldn’t imagine waiting each day for just one piece of candy.

Like other Advent calendars, theirs helped them count down the days to Christmas. But I can tell you, as a kid I didn’t need help with *that*. The decorations themselves told me that presents would soon be arriving under the tree. Some extended family would mail presents to us, so those were placed under the tree ahead of time. But I wasn’t really interested in those because they usually turned out to be socks, or Avon cologne, or soap on a rope. But as Christmas got closer, more and more of the presents would show up under the tree that our parents got my brother and me. A few of the bigger ones didn’t show up until sometime during the night before Christmas; we were told Santa brought those. But I counted down the days to make sure I didn’t miss it. I closely monitored everyone who came in and out of the house to see what they brought in or took out. Each night was met with more and more restlessness, not wanting to sleep or even close your eyes because—what if you miss it? What if you miss the magic? What if you miss the wonder? What if you miss Santa Claus on the rooftop or sneaking presents under your tree? For many of us, Advent was a time of perpetual watchfulness as children. You watched closely each and every day with wonder.

Maybe your story is different than that, but most of us can relate to a time we were anticipating *something* – a wedding day, the birth of a baby, retirement, a long-worked-for raise—whatever it might be, we know what it is like to watch in extreme anticipation and waiting.

Our Bible passage for today is about this type of waiting and watching, never losing focus on what we should have our eyes on: the return of Jesus.

Would you stand with me as I read it to us? This is Jesus being quoted in this passage:

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. (Matthew 24:36-44, niv)

May God bless to our hearts the reading of His Word. Thank you – you may be seated! Many of us read those verses with the baggage of fear, and there’s some good reason for that because the verses right before these are a bit gloomy—to say the least. There is definitely a sign of caution here to not be distracted, to stay the course, but the overall message is *not* one of fear. It’s ultimately one of *hope*: that God keeps his promises, that Christ will return, and that if we stay the course, if we are watchful and ready, we will see this hope fulfilled.

To start with, then, remember that we must...

1. ***Focus*** on what we are ***called*** to.

The passage we just read shows us that there is a kind of distractedness that can consume all of us if we are not careful and attentive. Instead of staying focused on Christ, sharing Christ, and living the life Christ has called us to, other things rush in to distract us from what we’re here for.

If you look at the whole Gospel of Matthew, you’ll see that there is this overarching theme about sharing the Gospel with others. Now, there’s all kinds of amazing things in the book of Matthew, but over all of it, he wants to make sure we know that the Gospel is supposed to be shared with people. In fact, he concludes his book by giving us Jesus’ last words, Jesus’ commissioning of us, in Matthew 28:

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey

everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, niv)

Remember, I mentioned this at the end of our baptism service last Sunday; Jesus started his ministry being baptized and left this earth with the challenge for us to baptize new believers. After Jesus ascended into heaven, he made it clear that he expects us to carry on his mission of sharing his message of Good News of God’s Love for everyone – we are to go, make disciples of everyone, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey Jesus’ teaching. You might recognize that as our mission statement: introduce people to Jesus Christ, equip people with a faith that works, and live as people with purpose. There’s no question that this is what we are to be doing until Jesus returns.

If you’ve been around our church very long, you know that we believe that to live as people with purpose means that we both *share* and *show* the Good News of God’s Love, and we get that from Jesus’ clear teaching in what’s been called “the parable of the sheep and goats” in **Matthew 25:31–46**. It’s a long passage, and I’d really encourage you to read it, but let me paraphrase it for you. Jesus talks about the day when he will separate people at the final judgement between those who’ve done good and those who’ve done bad, like a shepherd would separate sheep from goats. Then, those who’ve done good, and those who’ve not done good both ask for the reason that they were separated into the two groups. Jesus answers them saying that when they gave a drink of water to someone who was thirsty, or food to someone who was in need of food, or showed hospitality to a stranger in need or visited someone in prison, whenever they showed compassion or generosity to someone in need, they were doing it for Jesus. When they denied someone in need, they denied Jesus. It’s in this passage where we learn that the call of those following Christ is to a life lived with love and compassion for those around us. That’s what Jesus expects of us in our personal lives and in our church. That’s why our church works so hard to help the children in the two schools – Wide Hollow Elementary across the street, and Mountainview down the road – because the majority of those students are at the government level of poverty. We have a call to join the mission of God in the world, and we are doing it in our neighborhoods.

But the problem is when we begin...

2. ***Losing* Focus.**

You really see this truth if you back up and get a wider view of today’s passage, looking at the context it is in. By the way, *any* Scripture passage, no matter how powerful it is by itself, needs to be considered within its broader context, and then *that* broader context needs to be considered within the context of the rest of the Bible. Okay? That’s a tip for you whenever you are reading the Bible in order to understand it. So the context for this passage shows us that right after this, Jesus gives several parables that illustrate how much it is in our nature to be distracted.

In the very next chapter (25), Jesus tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids. In the story there are ten bridesmaids waiting for an eligible young ruler to return so he can pick his bride. It's kind of an ancient version of "The Bachelor." Listen to what Jesus said, and as you do, watch for the lesson on distractions:

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' "But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

(Matthew 25:1-13,niv)

Can you see that the difference between the good bridesmaids and the foolish ones was that the foolish ones were distracted?

Right after that, Jesus tells the parable of the bags of gold (**Matthew 25:14-30**). In that story, Jesus tells of a rich man who knows he's going away for a long while, so he entrusts three of his servants different amounts of his money, in order for them to invest them on his behalf. Two of them invested it and doubled it. They are invited into the rich man's house to enjoy their reward. The third didn't do anything with it – just buried it and got distracted, so he returned the same amount to the owner. The rich man called him "wicked" and "lazy," and threw him out, "into the darkness, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth."

(**Matthew 25:31-46**) Then, right after those two parables is the parable of the sheep and the goats that we talked about earlier – the difference between those who were focused on their calling and those who were distracted.

So if we look back into the passage we read at the beginning, we also see this distractedness in verses 37-39:

“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.” (Matthew 24:37-39, niv)

The issue that Jesus is raising here with the people in the time of Noah was *not* that the people were marrying, eating, and drinking. That wasn't the problem. The issue was that they allowed those things to *distract* them from the reality that destruction was coming their way, and, ultimately, they were distracted from the opportunity to be saved from that destruction. The reason they were caught off guard was because they forgot about God; they were not paying attention to the signs around them that were pointing them toward salvation; instead, they were focused on other things.

Our problem is that we are not different than they were; we also are a distracted people – even as Christians.

While we may know that Christ is coming, we often allow other things to consume our time and attention, and because of these distractions we sometimes forget our own call to compassion and love. We live in a culture that is wired to keep us distracted from priorities – designed to keep us focused on certain advertising products. Just walk through Walmart while it is decorated for Christmas, and try to count how many signs and displays are competing for your attention even as you walk in the door.

This time of year, it's not hard for us to see the obvious distractions in our lives. Busyness is a problem all throughout the year, but this season can feel particularly busy, with all the family, with getting presents, with all the events.

Materialism is another distraction issue, especially as we near Christmastime. There's a lot of shiny stuff at Christmastime, and some of us are easily distracted by all the shiny things. Sometimes the shiny-ness of all the gifts can be so distracting that we can begin to view both getting and giving as a way to be fulfilled, making materialism a huge distraction.

Also, keeping up appearances—the way we, and our homes, look to others—can become a serious distraction in our lives.

Family can be a distraction, even though family is really good! Much like the people in Noah's time weren't wrong for getting married and celebrating, we aren't wrong for spending time with family, but sometimes even good things like our family can become the focus of the season more than Jesus.

There are all kinds of things that distract us from looking for Christ in our lives and in the world around us.

So we need to know, how do we go about...

3. ***Regaining* Focus?**

Advent is supposed to be a season for regaining our focus; that's why waiting is so much a part of Advent. Advent means "arrival," so this season is supposed to be a time of remembering the way the world waited for the first arrival of the Messiah, and at the same time it reminds us that we as Christians today are awaiting Jesus' second Advent – to watch for it without distraction. So while the passage we read at the beginning might feel like an odd one for Christmas, it is a very appropriate one for Advent.

As we just said, we are reminded to be aware of the distractions in our life and to remember the birth of Christ.

Whether we do it through a box full of Advent drawers and candies, or we do it each day in our prayers, each week of Advent we are called to look back to Christ's birth and remember. Let this season do exactly what it was designed to do: serve as a way to regain your focus.

But, like we said, Advent is not just a remembrance of Christ's birth; we are also reminded each week to look ahead to Christ's return. Just like the anticipation we had when we were children, looking forward to Christmas day or another important day, we are reminded to look forward for Christ's return. So the question becomes:

“What distractions do you need to *remove* from your life to regain focus on Christ?”

Take a few moments and consider what distractions you need to remove, and write a couple of things down in your notes or in your church app.

The next question is:

“What do you need to *add* to your life to regain focus on Christ?”

Take a few moments and consider what you need to add that can help you regain and keep your focus on Christ, and write a couple of things down in your notes or in your church app.

For Christians, we cannot think of Christ's first Advent without also thinking about his second one. And those of us who anticipate the return of Christ are hopeful. As difficult as this life can be, we know that the hardships and trials we face now will be made right at Christ's return.

Until then, we know that God's Kingdom, though not here yet, is still at work in this world. So when we are anticipating Christ's return and maintaining our focus on him, we look for and see where the Holy Spirit is already at work in the world. We partner with the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, in much the same way Noah partnered with God in building the ark. Our calling is to introduce people to Jesus, and we do that both in what we say about him, and how we show people the way he is through our own actions of love toward each

other and others, and our acts of compassion to those in need. We don't have to be afraid at all about what might happen when Jesus returns.

On a balmy January Saturday morning almost two years ago, an alert warning of nuclear doom¹ was mistakenly sent to millions of people across the state of Hawaii.

"BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII.
SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL."

Those were the words that flashed on cell phones and televisions screens across the state – including the cell phones of Shelly, myself, and my parents. We were vacationing in Hawaii with my folks at the time. The message was the result of a huge mistake by an employee of the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency who selected the wrong option in a text-based dropdown menu. There were no corrections coming, so we began checking social media. It was Twitter that actually gave the news that it was a mistake.

The agency eventually issued a correction, but people across the state and the mainland criticized the government for taking 38 minutes to issue the retraction.

Despite the public apology, the incident was overshadowed by the obvious, ominous question: *what if the threat had been real?*

That thought was on my mind, because fresh in the news had been reports of North Korea's threats to send nuclear missiles toward the United States. Even though Hawaii was supposed to be the first line of defense in warning our country against an attack, we were all left wondering what would have happened if the threat were real. But I can tell you that when I saw that text, I thought, "I didn't really want to die yet, but if I do, it's okay – we'll be in heaven in a literal flash!"

I really wasn't afraid. In that passage we read at the beginning, there is a real sense of fear about what will happen when Jesus comes back. But the fear in those verses is *never* for those who trust in the Lord; the fear is *always* for those who don't trust Jesus.

Historically, the Christian Church has a calendar, just like the Gregorian calendar that we all use, that starts the new year on January 1. For the Christian calendar, Advent is the mark of the new year in the church. But no matter when we count it, new years are a time for resolutions and for thinking of ways we want to improve. We don't always think of Advent as a season of reflection and renewal, but what if we shifted our thinking? What if we found a way to reduce distractions, to simplify things, and to focus on remembering the coming of Christ and anticipating his return? How might we be transformed by that, and how might the world be transformed by our faithful witness of watching and waiting with hope?

Pray

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/13/us/hawaii-false-alarm-react/index.html>