

November 28, 2004, First Sunday of Advent  
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Rev. Dian G. Jackson  
Text: Matthew 24:36-44  
Subject: Why are we waiting?

Prayer: Awaken us from our slumbering, Mighty God, and make our waiting this Advent season as much participation as it is anticipation - a time of actively seeking to make your love know. Amen. [Seasons of the Spirit, November 2004]

Has anyone here either read the *Left Behind* series or seen the movies? Raise your hands. This is a series about what will happen in the end times. A friend of mine from my home church in Creedmoor, North Carolina couldn't wait to bring the book to my attention. She was so excited when she read it, and she wanted my reactions. So, I felt obligated to at least peruse the book and preview the film. Upon seeing the film, I concluded that Hollywood did a pretty decent job, especially if you're into scifi, or magic, talking about "watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat" or "shazzam!" People were disappearing into thin air, pots were left boiling over on the stove, cars running off the freeway with no driver to be found... That's what the *Left Behind* series is all about. And when you read the book or watch the movie, you're liable to be scared half out of your wits..and you wonder how on earth LeHaye and Jenkins came up with such goobly gunk! Certainly, no one with any rational thought can really believe this stuff! Or can they? Is it goobly gunk? For when you read the gospel writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, you go..."my word, it's in the book!" Listen to these words from Matthew's gospel (Chapter 24:36-44):

Is this what we are waiting for? Are we anxiously going through our daily routines, consciously anticipating the moment when we will be talking on the phone and all of a sudden ... eerie silence on the other end. Gone. *Without a trace*. Even on the new hit series, the person is usually accounted for before the show goes off the air.

This morning, the words Jesus speaks through the gospel writer are not intended to stir fearful anticipation, though many interpreters have tipped the scales in that direction. Yet, throughout the sacred texts, we hear and read about our God who continually acts to establish covenantal relationships with us. But as we pray for God's reign to come in this Advent season, we recognize that God's reign has already arrived in the presence of Jesus Christ. So, we have no reason to live our lives in fear of the eschaton (end times, last days). Let us live as redeemed people of God, who walk in the light of God. How do we journey in God's light in our communities each day? We do so by celebrating God's gift of Jesus to us.

Jesus came to teach us how to live in the realm of God. God's world is a world of peace, a world of caring and sharing. Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah that John read this morning? "*Come, let us go up to the mountains of the Lord, that God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths. God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*"

This is the day of the Lord. This is what we are waiting for! The day when there will be no need for weapons of mass destruction, where hatred, jealousy, greed, fear, arrogance, will turn into love, acceptance, equality, generosity, humility, and justice. Nation will not rise against nation, denomination will not rise against denomination, organizations will work together, communities will be in solidarity, churches will be united in one Spirit, one Lord, one baptism, Muslim will not rise against Christian, Christian will not rise against Jew, heterosexual will not rise against homosexual, where white will not rise against black, parents will not rise against children, individual will not rise against another individual. Swords and hurtful words will be turned into shovels and words of healing that can be a means of life. Spears and weapons designed to destroy and kill will be turned into swing sets, and used to build homes, schools, playgrounds, or tools for harvesting food.

This is what Jesus teaches us. This is the gift God has given us in God's Son. And by re-imagining ourselves and our capabilities through God's lenses, we can see the beauty of God's realm and the possibility for peace and shalom unfolding – all around us. The Holy One is not through with us. God continues to act in creation, and it's not just redemptive possibilities of our steel I'm speaking of – God continues to redeem our hearts.

Certainly, we cannot be so idealistic to expect peace among all nations in the immediate future. But the Scriptures give us the assurance that God will one day reign - in peace. According to the text, peace will come when the nations have been taught God's way and walk in God's paths. Peace is a beautiful vision, isn't it? Yet, "be it noted, peace rests in no human program but in obedience to divine law." [J. Bright in Peake's Commentary on the Bible] No, we as individuals can not bring peace to all the world, yet we can begin, one word or one deed at a time, to live as redeemed people in God's kingdom. You remember the song, *Let There Be Peace on Earth...* well, peace begins with me - with us!

We as people of God, who live as people of light and walk as people of peace, have a responsibility. **First**, we must turn our own weapons into ploughshares, our own spears into pruning hooks. God calls us to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. We are urged to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" or "clothe ourselves in the new being of Christ" so that we are warmed, protected, and adorned. What does it mean to be clothed in Christ? In the words of the great Apostle (Paul) in his letter to the early church, it means to eliminate certain vices from our lives, reveling and drunkenness, sexual immorality and debauchery, quarreling and jealousy – sins against the faith community as well as sins against one's self. To be clothed in Christ means to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, to bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. It means to be clothed above all in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. To be clothed in Christ means that all we do in word and deed, we must do in the name of the Lord Jesus. [Romans, Colossians] This the kind of community God calls us to be. This is what we are waiting for!

**Second**, let us go to Jerusalem (which for us are our places of worship), where we can learn God's ways and follow in God's paths. Yes, conflict will arise, but they will be settled by God's divine will, rather than human will. **Third**, let us walk in God's light – light of joy, peace,

happiness, love, where all are welcome. As Christians who are guided by the light of God, we are called to live as if God's reign, God's kingdom, has come (is already here). For it is here. It has come to us in God's Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Yes, it is for us a life of tension, for we live within this present old age as if we are already living in the new age that is to come. God does not expect us to live this life by ourselves. We live this life by putting on the Lord Jesus, being clothed in Christ's righteousness. You see, those who do not know Christ, only have our witness about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We here at Elon Community Church must be conscious of our witness in the community (among ourselves and out there) and in the world. When people hear about us, or when we are speaking to others about our church family, what are we speaking? Are people being invited to participate in God's reign?

**Fourth** (finally), be ready. We do not know the minute or the hour when Jesus Christ will come in His glory. Yet, there is one thing we do know. *Jesus Christ is coming*. Halleluia. Christ has come. Christ is here. Christ will come again. (This is a part of the communion liturgy we faithfully say each month.) Be ready. Wake up! as the great Apostle (Paul) said to the Romans. Live so that others might also follow Christ and receive salvation.

I would mislead you if I claimed to know exactly what the eschaton (end times) will look like, or when it will come. The early witnesses thought it would be soon (and that was 2000 years ago). They left us their understanding of what Christ's return in glory will look like, which for many of us, seems more like material for a great scifi film. What I'd like to leave with you this morning, is a challenge to develop a Christian sense of time. Not just knowing the time of day, season of the year, or making notations on a calendar. The New Testament urges us to be alert, to be prepared for Christ's return – not because we know when it will be – because we know what it means.

What does it mean for us? It means the difference between divine will and human will. It means sensing the tension between good and evil that goes on all around us, and yes, within us. It means recognizing Christ's coming to mean a major difference in the conflict between light and dark – as dark as things are right now, because Christ is here, and because Christ is coming, things are not as dark as they could be. The light of God provides significant illumination in the world. In this Advent season, as we await uncertain certainties, let us walk in God's light, in the confidence that God reigns.

Why are we waiting? Watch. Stay awake. Jesus Christ is coming back! Be ready.