
Advent 1

Matthew 24:36–44
Liberated by God's Grace



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Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come.
Come to us in all the moments of our lives.
Help us to watch so that we are amazed by
your love. Bless us in our Advent journey.
Amen.

A series of Advent devotions prepared by the leaders of Anglican and Lutheran churches in full communion.



The Anglican Church of Canada



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But of that day and hour no one knows...and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man...two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left...you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Welcome to Advent.

This warning from Jesus comes after Jesus' words about the end of the world. The apocalypse is upon us, there will be tribulation and the world will see the day of God's vengeance on human sin. This doesn't seem to quite fit with the Christmas decorations, lovely carols, and relentless merriness that has been in stores, in advertisement, and in the media since Labor/Labour Day. It is jarring to hear about judgement and the Second Coming whilst shopping for that perfect Christmas sweater or sampling figgy pudding. And what about our Lord's admonition to be awake, be aware, be ever-vigilant? We won't know the hour. We might be left behind. At the very least it is exhausting to be on watch all day every day.

How is this passage from Matthew good news, and how is it good news at this time of the year? Where is the grace and how do these verses help us to know that we are liberated by God's grace? It sounds like the law to me. It seems to be about what we need to do to be ready on that great and terrible day, what action we must take so that we will be taken and not left behind. Blessed Advent? Bah humbug!

There is a secular counterpart to this apocalypse. Young children are taught that Santa Claus is keeping track of who is "naughty or nice," meting out consequences and rewards accordingly. Popular Christmas song lyrics, while upbeat in cadence, deliver messages that instill dread. The message is clear: Be awake, be aware, be ever vigilant. The day is drawing nigh.

It is interesting that pop culture can give voice to the prevailing theology of many in our churches. We don't trust that God's promised grace is real and for us and so we come to believe and act that the word of God is not gracious, but vengeful and punishing. Through that lens there is no way that we can see the gospel for the first Sunday in Advent as the announcement that we are liberated by God's grace.

But hear the Good News. Jesus was announcing the end of the world. It is the day of God's vengeance on human sin. And this is what God's vengeance looks like: a helpless baby in a stable in Bethlehem, a helpless man on a cross outside of Jerusalem. The end of the old world of sin and death has come exclusively through God's reconciling mercy.

Matthew 24: 36–44 is God's word of promise, a gift to us that we might open ourselves, our eyes, our lives to the incredible, surprising, immeasurable and intimate love of God. It's right there in front of us—two men working in a field, two women grinding meal—in the ordinary, in the everyday. God doesn't want us to miss it. God wants us to watch. ♦
