

Matthew
Year A

ON EARTH AS IT IS
IN HEAVEN

The Spiritual Wisdom
of the Gospels for
Christian Preachers
and Teachers



JOHN SHEA

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of the Gospels for
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On Earth as It Is in Heaven

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First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:36-44



Staying Awake in Everyday Life

A Spiritual Commentary

[Jesus said to the disciples:] “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.

God, the mysterious and transcendent Father, is the only reality who knows when the event called “the coming of the Son of Man” will happen. So we on earth cannot plan for it in the normal way. Since we do not know when it will arrive, we cannot schedule our preparation. We do not know when we should stop doing “business as usual,” focus our attention and energy on the upcoming event, and start getting ready. The way we prepare for the “coming of the Son of Man” will have to be different.

For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Although we do not know *when* it will come, we do know something about *how* it will come. It will be like it was in the days of Noah. Although the people in the “days before the flood” were usually considered evildoers, this is not what St. Matthew’s Jesus stresses. He characterizes them as caught up in the everyday affairs of life—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. There is nothing wrong with these activities except that they are all consuming. They keep them from “knowing” something deeper, something of vital importance for their well-being. They are ill prepared, and so the flood carries them away. “[T]he coming of the Son of Man” has an element of danger in it if you are inattentive. Therefore, the preparation project for the “coming of the Son of Man” is not to be caught unaware.

Then 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.

These two images continue the themes of everyday life and danger. Preparation for the day of the Lord does not mean stopping everyday life. Both men, the one “taken” into the kingdom and the one left behind, are out in the field. Both women, the one “taken” into the kingdom and the one left behind, are grinding at the mill. It is not that one is out in the field and the other is praying, or that one is grinding at the mill and the other is in the temple. So the encouragement of the text is not the strategy of traditional piety—to quit the tasks of everyday life and engage in religious activity, especially when you know a major religious moment is about to occur.

So where is the difference between these two men and women? If both are doing the same things, why is one taken and one left?

The text does not explicitly consider this question. But the context suggests that inner vigilance and awareness make the difference. On the visible, outer level both men and both women are the same. Therefore, the difference must be interior. It must be on the level of awareness. Attentiveness seems to be the lesson to draw from the comparison of the “days of Noah” and the day of “the coming of the Son of Man.” And, in the next line, the storyteller makes it explicit in a bold injunction:

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

The event called “the coming of the Son of Man” is now also properly called “the day of the Lord.” Although we do not know when it will come, its importance for the well-being of people is strongly stressed. The negative images of being swept away in a flood and left behind in the field or at the mill are complemented by the image of having your house broken into. Not to be ready for this day is to suffer severe consequences.

However, everything hinges on how “the coming of the Son of Man” and “the day of the Lord” is understood. A literal approach sees it as the cosmic coming of an end-time figure in an outer, visible way to judge the

living and dead. There will come a day when Jesus will return and those who have fallen asleep, who have not faithfully practiced his teachings, will be judged negatively. We cannot prepare for this judgment at the last minute for we do not know when the last minute will be. Therefore, enlightened self-interest would dictate ongoing, scrupulous observance.

The difficulty of this approach is connecting fidelity to Jesus' teachings with a coming but not-yet-arrived cosmic event. When the second coming does not come, it is difficult to stay poised and waiting. Even when we are assured that second coming delayed is not second coming denied, vigilant awareness devolves into "hoping to hear in time." When a questioner asked Pope John XXIII what he would advise people in the Vatican to do if he heard Christ was coming a second time, he responded, "Look busy." This great comic line depicts the ordinary way we think. The thunderous command to "stay awake" is reduced to "wake me when he's near." And if he is never near or if people have cried "wolf" too often and said he was near but he was not, the rationale for fidelity and attentiveness is undercut.

But "the coming of the Son of Man" and "the day of the Lord" can be understood in a different way. They can be interpreted as symbolic code for God's invitation into the fullness of human life through Christ. The Lord is eternally present to human life, creating, judging, redeeming, and calling it to fullness. However, we are often not aware of this permeating divine activity. When, through the teachings of Jesus, God's redeeming presence enters human consciousness, it is "the day of the Lord" and the "Son of Man" has arrived. We never know when this will happen. So we must "stay awake through the night." This breakthrough can happen at any time. When it does and our attentiveness receives its gracious communication, we are dry in Noah's ark, taken into the Kingdom, and safe in our own house. "[Y]ou know what time it is . . . it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep" (Rom 13:11).

Teaching

There is a story entitled, "What is the World Like?":

God and a man are walking down the road. The man asks God, "What is the world like?"

God replies, "I cannot talk when I am thirsty. If you could get me a drink of cool water, we could discuss what the world is like. There is a village nearby. Go and get me a drink."

The man goes into the village and knocks at the door of the first house. A comely young woman opens the door. His jaw drops, but he manages to say, "I need a glass of cool water."

"Of course," she says, smiling, "but it is midday. Would you care to stay for some food?"

"I *am* hungry," he says, looking over his shoulder. "And your offer of food is a great kindness."

He goes in and the door closes behind him.

Thirty years go by. The man who wanted to know what the world was like and the woman who offered him food have married and raised five children. He is a respected merchant and she is an honored member of the community. One day a terrible storm comes in off the ocean and threatens their life. The merchant cries out, "Help me, God."

A voice from the midst of the storm says, "Where is my cup of cold water?"

Spiritual traditions always warn people about becoming lost in the world. (They also warn about being lost in God, but that's another issue.) The demands of everyday life are merciless. There is always more to do and not enough time to do it. A friend of mine wants inscribed on her tomb the saying, "It's always something." At times this constant activity may be boring; at other times it may be exciting. But from the point of view of the story it breeds lack of attention to the demands of God.

What is the world like? The answer of the story is that it is a place of forgetfulness. Or, in the metaphor of Matthew's text, it is a place where we fall asleep. We do not stay attentive to the spiritual dimension of life. Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in the field, and grinding at the mill take all our time and, more importantly, take all our mind. When this happens, we find ourselves lacking passion, purpose, and pleasure. As one perplexed person put it, "How can I be so busy and yet so empty?"

This dominance of everyday activity is particularly true in the Christmas season. Already busy people become busier. They have to prepare for the season, which often means more shopping and more work. Unfortunately, this frantic preparation often puts people to sleep spiritually. People begin to long not for the birth of the Christmas Christ, but for the lazy, doldrums days of January. The rush of the season works against the message of the season.

Almost everyone has experienced his or her spirits being depleted and even defeated. However, often the alarm does not go off. We toler-

ate what T.S. Eliot called, "living and partly living." We wrongly treat spirit as a luxury. If our bodies are hurting, we will pay attention to them and work hard to recover our physical health. If our financial security or social status is under attack, we will struggle and fight ceaselessly for our money and position. But we will allow our spirit to languish and even atrophy. This tendency to neglect spirit may be the underlying insight of Matthew into the people of Noah's time. They valued everything but the Spirit that ultimately sustained them.

How are we to keep spiritually aware in the midst of everyday activity? How are we to keep awake while working in the field and grinding at the mill? This is not easy. We may have the desire, but we may lack the know-how. And to shout the command, "stay awake!" (v. 42; NAB) as St. Matthew's Jesus does, may strengthen commitment, but it does not show a way forward. We need to complement desire with strategies.

Some friends of mine, long-time victims of the stress of everyday activities, suggest smuggling spiritual exercises into the world of work. A Jewish doctor says a Hebrew prayer of purification every time she washes her hands. She explains that the prayer is not meant to purify but to remind her that the person she is treating is more than their disease. In other words, she stays awake to the spiritual dimension of people while she attends to their bodily distress.

A man pauses before a Christmas tree in the building where he works. He brings to mind the connection between heaven and earth and ponders the theological truth that creation is grounded in God. He says that as long as he holds onto this truth, his day goes better. "I notice more. I see the deeper sides of people. And I'm more patient, and respectful." The awareness of Spirit brings pleasure, passion, and purpose.

Spiritual exercises help us "stay awake through the night." These exercises may be the rituals and prayers of a faith tradition that we engage in with other people. But they may also be home grown practices. Personal "things" we have learned to cultivate in order to stay focused on the deeper dimension of life. These practices become the path to the Gospel value of constant, vigilant awareness. And constant, vigilant awareness is the precondition in order to know and respond to the "coming of the Son of Man" and the arrival of the "day of the Lord."