

"The Days of Noah"

Matthew 24:37-44

December 1, 2019 - Advent 1 A

"Therefore, you also must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect". Mt. 24:44

Dear Friends in Christ,

I mentioned earlier that today is the beginning of the new Church Year. The new church year begins with a season of preparation – the season of Advent. As Advent begins and we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas, the message of today's Gospel lesson is...you need to be prepared at all times, because Jesus is coming in glory to judge, and He's coming at an unexpected time.

Here in Matthew 24, our Lord tells us that He's coming to judge, and you don't know when it's going to be. However, in this text Jesus tells you how it's going to be: it's going to be like the days of Noah.

I. Days of Noah, Days of Judgment

Our Lord declares that, when He returns in glory, the world will have no clue that Judgment Day is imminent: But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

If you want to know what the last days of the world will be like, says Jesus, look at the days of Noah. So, let's do that. Of the days of Noah, Genesis 6 records that the wickedness of man had grown so great, and his thoughts were so continually evil, that the Lord was sorry for creating mankind. He therefore resolved to destroy man. And how was this wickedness and great evil reflected in the lives of the people? They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.

That's a frightening picture, one that ought to disturb profoundly: when Jesus describes this wicked time, it doesn't sound like a horror movie where everyone was filled with a sense of dread that something terrible was about to happen. They were eating. They were drinking. They were getting married. It wasn't necessarily daily drunken revelry as some depictions indicate; it may have been a rather advanced society with all sorts of social programs to help the underprivileged, but the people had nearly unanimously turned against God. At any rate, eating and drinking and getting married is not a description of people who are aware of great evil and impending doom. As far as they were concerned at the time, life couldn't be better. Everything was okay. There was nothing out of the ordinary that would say otherwise.

Except, of course, for Noah. There was that one man, along with his three sons and their wives. He was building a boat. A big boat. And, for all we know, there wasn't a large body of water around. He was a preacher of righteousness; and for the 100 years or so that it took to build the ark, he was preaching the Word of God and telling his neighbors to repent. He was warning that a flood is coming, that they would be destroyed.

So, look at this from the perspective of the unbeliever. Life was good, except for a nutcase building a giant boat in a world that had never known a drop of rain, much less a flood. Except for the seven others who believed the Word of God, everyone else was convinced that Noah was a fool. But look at this from the perspective of God. In Ezekiel 14:14 and 2 Peter 2:5, the Lord praises Noah as a righteous man and a preacher of righteousness. Forget the world, the Lord knew Noah and saved him.

Keep in mind one other thing: Noah preached God's Word to his neighbors for 100 years; and after 100 years of ministry, he won not one convert from those around him. By the standards of those in our present time who measure the success of church by statistics, he was a miserable failure; but God extols him as a faithful preacher of righteousness. Sometimes, the mission field is just that rocky; that's how it was in the days of Noah.

Noah faithfully preached God's Word and built that boat, while the world enjoyed itself and sensed no impending doom. In fact, Jesus says that the people around Noah had no idea anything bad was going to happen until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away.

And that, says the Lord, is how the end of the world will be. The world will continue on its merry way, with no idea whatsoever that God's judgment is coming; but suddenly, that judgment will come and all who do not believe will be taken away in judgment.

So, let's take stock of the world today. The threat of terrorism and mass destruction remains, but otherwise life is pretty good. Technology and sciences have made our lives easier and of higher quality for a longer time. There's much talk about the importance of respecting one's neighbor, accepting one another and getting rid of hate. In many ways, it seems that we're on our way to the science-fiction version of earth where all the problems are solved and we all get along. Seriously, compared to centuries of plague and war, things appear pretty peaceful overall; thus, many will say that the world has never been in better shape.

On the other hand, it's legal to kill the unborn, and it's becoming increasingly legal to kill the elderly and disabled. The world demands that we tolerate all sorts of sexual immorality, even help fund it. On the one hand, we're told that we can't talk about God in society or have him in public education; on the other hand, we're told that we must talk about any other god in public life and education, as part of cultural studies. Rather than admit that science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, popular science declares that we accidentally emerged over billions of years from primordial soup, cutting God out of the picture. Or, as a modern children's book proclaim: "I'm a speck of stardust". Many, many even in Christendom have rejected the Word of God for false doctrines instead. In fact, society today will tolerate just about anything except for the truth of God's Word and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In other words, while the world seems to be moving along quite well and optimistically, it's ripe for judgment. We live in days like the days of Noah, and so the Lord could return at any time. He may not; we may yet encounter another reformation and more time before the end. But overall, we live in the days of Noah.

Therefore, we heed these words of Jesus and make the following applications.

First, do not judge the state of the world by the world's measures; measure the world according to the Word of God. If God does not exist, if Jesus is not coming back to judge, then this is a better time to live than any time previously in history; and the unbelieving world will do its best to convince you of that. And since the world has your own sinful flesh as its sympathetic ally, it's easy to believe that everything is okay and only getting better. But I exhort you to cling to the Scriptures, the truth of God. Acknowledge the reality of evil, confess your sin, and rejoice in the forgiveness of your Savior.

Second, do not measure the Church by the standards of the world. It is a terrible, popular notion that a congregation that is blessed by God will automatically grow in numbers. It will keep pace with the population increases around it; and if it doesn't, then it must be doing something wrong. Remember the days of Noah: after one hundred years of preaching, there were only eight names in the church directory. In our business-oriented world, we're accustomed to measuring everything by profit and growth; and it sure is a lot easier to measure a congregation by a couple of statistics than it is faithfully to study the Word of God. But if you are to accuse a congregation of error only because it doesn't grow quickly, you must first believe that Noah was a rotten preacher. Then you must explain why the Lord is wrong when He calls Noah faithful and righteous. (Don't misunderstand: I'm not saying that pastors are always right. I am saying that statistics don't prove a pastor wrong.)

Third, we take a moment here to condemn the notion of Dispensational Millennialism. This is a teaching popularized by Tim LaHaye and his Left Behind series of novels, which twist Scripture to create a false, fairy-tale idea of the end of the world. Among these teachings is the false doctrine called "The Rapture", a silly notion that-before the end of the world-all believers will suddenly disappear and be taken to heaven, while all unbelievers will be "left behind" in order to witness the death throes of the world which follow, and which will take another 1000 years or so. The Rapture is supposedly found in a couple of Bible verses, including this passage from our Gospel lesson: "Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left." "Aha!" they'll say. "This proves that, one day, all Christians will disappear, while everyone else remains. You don't want to be 'left behind,' do you?"

No, it doesn't prove that at all. Take a look at the Gospel lesson, at the days of Noah. When the Flood came, what happened? The flood came and took them all away. Took who away? The Flood came and took away all the unbelievers; only those on the ark were left behind.

Likewise, when the Lord returns in judgment, it will be sudden. Two men will be in the field: one will be taken away in judgment, and the other left behind in God's care. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken away in judgment, and the other left behind for eternal life. This text does not teach that Christians will be taken over a thousand years before the world ends; it teaches just the opposite! It teaches that the end will come suddenly, without warning; and it teaches that it is the unbelievers who will be taken away.

We might add, too, that the Greek word for "left behind" in Matthew 24 is also the same word for "forgiven." Maybe it's just a coincidence. Maybe not. At any rate, those who are not taken away to wrath, are not taken away because they are forgiven. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let's be clear. When the Lord returns in glory, you want to be left behind.

Enough about the days of Noah as the days of judgment, and heed the warning well. To the world, everything will appear to be quite normal, even promising; and so there will be eating, drinking, marrying. However, in its enjoyment the world will also have rejected the Lord and His Word.

This is certainly the case in our world today, and the Lord could come back anytime-suddenly, without warning. Heed the warning well, because we live in days like the days of Noah.

II. Days of Noah, Days of Grace

But as you heed the warnings of God's Law, do not despair. It can be easy to be discouraged and distressed about the condition of the world today-and for good reason. However, the days of Noah were not just days of judgment; they were also days of grace.

Out of all the people in the world, only 8 were righteous; and while we don't know the world population at the time, 8 people was a percentage so small as to put the eight several zeroes to the right of the decimal point. It would be so easy to overlook 8 people among the masses of humanity, but the Lord didn't overlook them. He faithfully saved His people. Rather than wipe out the righteous with the unrighteous, He delivered all who trusted in Him.

And as we begin this Advent season and prepare for Christmas, we give thanks that the Lord is faithful to His promises and delivers His people. Centuries after Noah, the Lord Jesus became flesh and was born of Mary to win redemption for the world. Behold the love of God: instead of simply wipe you away with the rest of the sinful world, your Savior would rather endure scourge and cross and hell in order to save you.

The Lord remains that faithful even now. Therefore, as you wait and watch and remain ready by His grace for His return, you do so with the confidence that you are not forsaken. No matter how futile it looks to cling to the means of grace, and no matter how the Church will look in the world like a relic from the white elephant museum, the Lord is still with you and promises to deliver you. He remembered Noah. He remembers you.

He remembers you because He put His name on you in Holy Baptism. St. Peter refers to Noah (I Peter 3) as he calls the Flood an antitype to Baptism; as the Flood destroyed the wicked and saved the righteous, so also Baptism drowns your old sinful nature and saves you. At your Baptism, Jesus declared, "I have put My name on you, and I have brought you into the ark of My Church. No matter what the world says and no matter what the devil whispers, you belong to Me, and I will not forsake you."

The Lord remembers you and He still speaks His Word to you. The world will continue to reject the Word of God and insist on its own hopeless, killing ways and words instead. But no matter the world, you have this glad confidence: in the days of Noah, when there were only 8 righteous remaining, the Word of God still brought them grace and hope and life! Should the Church in this world be reduced to only 8 souls-or even only two or three!, you have the Lord's promises: "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them;" and "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The Lord remembers you and feeds you. He faithfully provided for the eight on the ark, and He provides for you. The world goes on eating, drinking and giving in marriage unconcerned about judgment and

eternity. But you have better eating, drinking and marriage. Your Bridegroom comes to you again and again that you might eat His body and drink His blood for the forgiveness of sins, so that you might be sure that you will be at the marriage feast of the Lamb in heaven.

My dear friends, the world is very evil and the time is growing late. But you are not forsaken. You live in the days of Noah, with the reality of impending judgment for the world. But these days of Noah are also days of grace, for the Lord preserves you as He preserved the 8 through the Flood. The Day of Judgment is coming, and it will come unexpectedly for all of us; but you are prepared, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen