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**PREPARE YOURSELF – HE IS COMING!**

The story is told of a farmer who enjoyed testing the LORD and telling others about it. On one occasion he wrote a letter to the local newspaper saying, “I have been trying an experiment with one of my fields.

- “I plowed it on Sunday.
- “I planted it on Sunday.
- “I cultivated it on Sunday.
- “I harvested it on Sunday.
- “And I stored it in my barn on Sunday.
- “And now, this October, I have more bushels to the acre in that field than any of my neighbors who went to church every Sunday!”

Underneath this letter, the newspaper editor published a single line of comment:

- “GOD does not always settle accounts in October.”

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A story like that brings home the meaning of this gospel reading.

- *“So you also must be ready, because the SON OF MAN will come at an hour when you do not expect HIM.”*
  - The trouble is, we’ve been hearing that all our lives and HE still isn’t here.

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Thursday was Black Friday.

- It used to be that Black Friday started on, well, Friday.
  - But as you know, these shopping opportunities have slowly but surely crept back into the wee hours of Friday, then to midnight, then to the evening of Thanksgiving day, and most recently, the whole of Thanksgiving itself.
- On the whole, we seem to have a very hard time waiting for things.

So did the early Christians to whom Matthew was writing.

- Keep in mind that Matthew’s gospel likely was written in the early 80’s of the first century, or roughly fifty years after the events that he is describing took place.
- Most of his readers had been expecting JESUS to return to them for some time—certainly during their lifetimes.
  - So, all the gospels include a section encouraging Christians who were confused and discouraged by JESUS’ delayed return to stay awake, keep prepared, and wait with anticipation.
    - Prepare yourself – HE is coming!
      - If they weren’t watching and waiting, they just might very well miss GOD’S advent among them through JESUS’ second coming.

The trouble is, though, that nearly two thousand years later, we’ve been waiting an awfully long time.

- So long, in fact, that most of us aren’t really waiting at all.
  - Which means that there’s a pretty good chance that JESUS’ words in this passage are falling on deaf ears.
    - I mean, if we can’t even wait until Friday morning to shop our deals, why should we think that any of us can keep waiting for JESUS?

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So let's focus for a bit, rather than on JESUS' return, but on the profound sense of uncertainty this passage might create for us.

- No one, JESUS says, knows when the LORD will come, not even JESUS HIMSELF
  - The SON OF MAN will come at an unexpected hour.

Uncertainty, surprise, unexpected events—these are things we know something about.

- Two colleagues were working at the same job; one was diagnosed with cancer, the other not.
- Two candidates ran for a coveted office; one was chosen, the other not.
- Two kids were navigating their way through high school; one fell addicted to drugs, the other did not.
- Two couples were joined in marriage; one stayed married, the other did not.

Our lives are filled with unexpected, surprising, life-altering events.

- And in the midst of all of this, we are invited—actually commanded—to keep watch for the presence of GOD we know in JESUS.
  - This isn't always easy, especially when the unexpected event is tragic.
- Sometimes you have to wait a while to see where GOD is at work and that can be painfully hard.

I've come to believe that GOD always brings good out of the bad or the evil.

- Not always in equal measure, insofar as we can see, and not always as quickly as we would like the good to happen.
  - Yet the promises throughout Scripture is that GOD faithfully and consistently meets us at our point of greatest need,
    - and accompanies us even and especially in the most difficult circumstance

Still as I've already said, watching and waiting are difficult for us—at least as difficult as it was for JESUS' earliest followers.

- Which is one of the main reasons that we come to church on Sunday!
  - That is, wrestling to make sense out of the pains and losses in our lives is more doable when we come to this place to hear the encouragements and promises read and proclaimed again and again.
  - Our straining to see GOD at work in the ups and downs of our lives is easier when we are here to be surrounded by other Christians,
    - some of whom are also struggling to see GOD,
    - and some of whom have recently seen GOD and can share with us what they have discovered.
  - Coming together with others who watch and wait for GOD is one of the ways that we can be assured that JESUS is coming and has come to be with us in the midst of and in the days and months and years following that which is hard and hurtful and unexpected.
    - While I'm not sure that this is exactly what Matthew had in mind when he wrote down this passage, I do think that one of the chief reasons Christians gather is to encourage each other and help each other to see the always present CHRIST, particularly during the dark and difficult times.
      - A millennium-and-a-half after Matthew put down these words, Martin Luther said something quite similar when he described the church as the place where you could count on the mutual comfort and consolation of the faithful.
        - And that tradition continues every time we meet.

And I think there is another reason why we are instructed to watch and wait.

- It has to do with relationships.

Imagine that GOD actually has a stake in our readiness;

- that our being ready and watchful is not just about us and what happens at the end, especially as for us as individuals,
    - but rather it has to do with us as persons in a relationship with GOD.
  - You see, GOD is committed to relationship.
    - It is part of the reason we were created—to be in relationship with GOD.
      - And relationship with GOD is not just about determining whether GOD will get you sometime in the future for working on the Sabbath,
      - or about determining who gets the good break and who doesn't.
        - Rather is about trusting the GOD cares that our focus is on JESUS and striving to be watchful and ready for HIS return.
  - Our GOD is a GOD of relationship.
    - GOD cannot *not* be in relationship and is relentless when it comes to maintaining relationships and wants us to be watchful for how GOD is doing that,
      - both now in part, and the in the future in fullness.
  - And where we often *can* see GOD'S coming is in the words and actions of others,
    - because, you see, our relationship with GOD is reflected in our relationships with others and theirs with us.
      - One of the assurances that JESUS is coming is that HE does come through those who act and speak in HIS name.
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The story is told of a meeting between the devil and his demons to discuss how best to destroy GOD'S people.

- One demon said, "I'll go tell them that there is no GOD."
    - "No," said Satan, "that won't work because most people believe that there is a GOD."
  - A second demon said, "I'll go tell them that there is no hell."
    - The devil though for a moment and said, "No, I believe that when people look at the inhumanity and evil in the world, they won't be convinced that there is no hell."
  - Finally a third demon spoke, "I've got the trick that will work. I'll tell them that there is a GOD and that hell is real, but I'll also tell them that there is plenty of time—that there is no hurry."
    - Satan laughed with glee as he said, "Yes, you go and do that. If they are not looking for it, they will then miss all that GOD is doing in their lives and we will destroy them by the millions."
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No one knows when tragedy will strike.

- No one knows when incredible blessing will occur.
- No one knows, but we do know this:
  - GOD comes and is present.
- Sometimes that's hard to see, and it is then that we need help.
- Sometimes that's easy to see, and it is then that we can help others.
  - That's the way the body of CHRIST worked all those years ago and, at its best, still works today.

We are people who live in the meantime—that time between the ascension and the second coming of CHRIST.

- And yet, the way we live our lives, the way we await HIS return is our witness that CHRIST is already with us.
  - Prepare yourself—be waiting and watchful.
    - HE is coming and HE does come—even now and every day in tragedy and celebration.
    - HE is coming and HE does come—in the relationships we have with others who also watch and wait.
    - HE is coming and HE does come—as we see the hope and comfort HE brings to us all,
      - the promises we see fulfilled in our lives even now because we are waiting and watching.