

READY FOR THE END
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 24:36-51

“Of that day and hour [when the end of the age will come], no one knows, not the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” That may be, but it has surely not stopped people from trying to calculate when the end of the age will come and Jesus will return.

One study¹ of the subject lists over 200 proposed dates through the years when Jesus would return.

In the year of our Lord 968 there was an eclipse of the sun, and people were sure it was the beginning of the end. A few years later in 989, Halley’s comet made one of its regular appearances in the sky, and people were sure that was a harbinger of the end. Of course the year 1000, the millennium, was a big time for predictions of the end of the age, with folks on their best behavior getting ready for the rapture.

Isaac Newton, the great mathematician, thought 1715 was the terminal date of the world. John Wesley, the father of the Methodist church, thought it would be 1836. A man named William Miller predicted the end on March 21, 1844. He even gathered some followers called Millerites. When that predicted date came and went, they said that they really meant October 22 of that year. And when that date came and went . . . well, you haven’t heard much from the Millerites lately.

In our own day the predictions continue. An invasion of killer bees in 1977 convinced some folks that the end was near. Hal Lindsey, who was famous a generation ago for his book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, predicted the end in 1981, although he later revised it to 2007, or maybe 2040 or 2047.

¹ On the internet site www.bible.ca.

Now, I understand, there is a new date being mentioned—2012, maybe December 21 or December 23 of that year. It has to do with an ancient Mayan Indian calendar.

But of that day and hour no one knows—not Tim LaHaye, the author of the Left Behind books; not Jerry Falwell, although Jerry, who died recently, may be in a better position to know the end than he did during his lifetime; and not you and me. We don't know.

And yet we affirm it. “From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” What do we make of that phrase of the Apostles' Creed? We have to admit that mostly we don't talk about it a lot. There are two reasons for that. One is that all this talk about the end of time and the return of Christ has mostly been captured by the religious right, and we've sort of left it to them. But the other reason we don't talk much about the end is that mostly we Presbyterians have a pretty good stake in this world the way it is now. We're having a pretty good ride, most of us, and we're not quite sure we want it to end, Jesus or otherwise.

So how necessary is all this talk about the return of Jesus and the end of time? Do we really need to spend time thinking about this? Let me say categorically that I believe that Jesus will return to bring this present age to a close. Let me also say categorically that I have no idea what I am talking about, or what that will look like, and certainly not when it will happen. I don't know if Christ will come in the clouds or on TV, whether it will be big and dramatic or quiet and unobtrusive. I simply affirm what the creed says: Christ will return.

I believe it for two reasons. First, Jesus said he would return, and I believe him. Second, if we ever needed the return of Christ, we need him now.

Why do we need the return of Christ? We need him because a kid was shot to death over on E. 8th St. not far from this sanctuary a couple of weeks ago in a drug deal gone bad.

Why do we need Christ to return? Because a cyclone recently blew through Bangladesh, killing thousands and wiping out the meager existence of thousands of others.

Why the return of Christ? Because our world is awash in war—war in Somalia, called one of the most dangerous places on earth; war in the Darfur region of the Sudan; war in the Gaza Strip; war of course in Iraq—war that kills children and destroys property and lays waste God's creation.

Why do we need the return of Christ? You know why, because of the terrible things that come into your own lives—the disease and death, the hurt and pain, the addiction and prejudice and greed that seem to characterize so much of human life.

The Christian prayer from the beginning has been: “Come, Lord Jesus.” Come to your broken world to set things right. Come, because things are in a fix and we seem to be unable to do anything about it. Come, and make this world your own.

So Jesus says in Matthew that the age will come to an end, but that we don’t know when it will end. And then it says: Be ready. If the owner of the house knew that the thief was going to break in at 2:25 in the morning, he’d be sitting up with his .357 Magnum waiting for him. But the problem is, we don’t know when it will happen. So how can we be ready when we don’t even know when to be ready?

That very way of asking the question makes it sound like getting ready is a burden. You know, the realtor is coming over to show your house to some prospective buyers, so you’ve got to toss all your dirty clothes in the hamper and throw magazines under the bed and make it look like your usually slovenly home is really something out of House Beautiful. Being ready for Christ sounds like we’ve got to spruce up and shape up and be on our best behavior, when what we’d really like to do is go out and have a good time and not worry about all this religious stuff.

But suppose getting ready for the return of Christ is not a burden, but a delight. Suppose getting ready for Christ is actually to live the best life there is. Every day, you live for the God who created you in love and who wants the best for you. Every day, you let the past with all its cares be past, and live in that which is fresh and new. Every day, you live the fullest and best and highest life of which you are capable as a human being.² You get ready for Christ as a bride gets ready for the bridegroom—with anticipation and expectancy and joy.

This is the first Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday of anticipation as we look forward to the coming of Christ. Again in this time we recall that the same Lord who came the first time in the manger will come again to claim this world for his own. We live between the first and second advents of Christ.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2004), p. 113.

And so we live as those who are ready for his return. All the time, we live that way. As followers of Christ, we want this to be a world where all people share in the bounty of this world—all have enough food, all have homes to live in, all have warm clothing. And it grieves us when we see people for whom that is not true. That's one way we get ready for Jesus.

As followers of Christ, we want to live in such a way that future generations will also be able to live. We want to leave a good world to our children and grandchildren. So we work for peace so they won't have to deal with war. We work for a clean world, so they will have a good environment.

As followers of Christ, we try to find ways to define our lives in ways besides having and keeping and owning a bunch of things. That's especially important in this shopping season, where some of you will go to the mall this afternoon to buy things for Christmas. You want to get the right gifts for those you love, but you also know that all of us are weighed down with too much stuff. How do you balance that? Talk about a burden! Christ calls us instead to a life where our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions.

Christ is coming again. You're sitting out there, some of you, not even sure if you agree with that statement or not. But on this day I challenge you to live as if you believed it, because getting ready for Christ is the best life there is. We want to do what we can to get this world ready for Christ, to present it to him as a gift when he comes to make it his own.

Getting ready for Christ's return is not a burden. It's a delight. Let it be the delight that gives you joy in these days while we wait for the one who comes. †