

## Message: "Faith's Vigilance Component"

### Scripture Lesson: Matthew 24:36-44

<sup>36</sup>"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup>For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>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, <sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>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. <sup>44</sup>Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

The Sunday after Thanksgiving is supposed to be a Sunday filled with the sense of gratitude for all that we have in life - family, friends, blessings, goodness, and a world in which God walks with us and shares with us what we need.

And then, we get a scripture like this. One that is dealing with the end of the world. Like in the times of Noah, normal life will be drastically ruptured as if a flood ripped through humanity; two people will be standing in a field, with suddenly one taken and one left; two will be attending the normal chores of the day, and instantly one will be taken and one left. Jesus is returning, and everything will be changed - and it is pretty clear that he is also saying, "Woe to those who are not ready." Not a very Thanksgiving-type message, is it?

Add to this the recent events of our world, and we see the challenge of cultivating a sense of thanksgiving grow even greater. As we find ourselves on the heels of yet another week of bloodshed, with shootings and stabbings and violence from Colorado Springs to Chesapeake to Idaho continuing to make the headlines, gratitude would seem to be less on the mind and heart than outrage, or mournfulness, or anger of varying degrees. Most outraged and hurt are those who lost family members and friends in the senseless carnage; just as outraged are those who have lost loved ones to the same types of violence before, from Columbine to Sandy Hook to Pulse in Florida to Virginia Tech to Las Vegas, Nevada - I've lost count of how many shootings there have been in recent years, as I bet you have as well.

What do we expect - when we have more guns than people in our country? (as of 2017, we actually have an average of 1.2 guns per person; I'm sure it's higher now....)

What do we expect - when we have countless messages glorifying violence, from video games to the movie industry to videos of fighting going viral on tik-tok?

What do we expect - when we have learned to hate so well, so easily, to separate into "us" and "them" in response to any difference of opinion?

What do we expect - when so many in leadership in our country speak a language of hostility void of reason, determined not to serve but to win at all costs by attacking the opposition, attacking science, attacking truth, attacking common sense? And what of those who find that kind of behavior worthy of a vote?

I need to stop there, because I'm in danger of the very debilitating practice of listing all the wrongs I see in the world, of which there are so very many. Such list-making is in danger of becoming a major habit in my life; how about yours? We have a lot of help from the news media, which constantly uplifts all that is wrong, skewed, damaging, traumatizing, and otherwise off about our world; their news is usually flavored with the powerful attractant of impending doom. We are made to feel that everything is at stake, that things are worse than we even know, that we are heading towards catastrophe greater than the mind can fathom.

So how about it? Are we on the edge of Armageddon?

Some certainly think so; this is a main teaching of many fundamentalist or conservative denominations, who advocate a "turn or burn" theology (turn from sin, or burn in hell, although I find it a more helpful prescription for successful barbecue on the grill.....) - in fact, this fear tactic is one of the most powerful conversion messages for the more evangelical denominations - who are most often quite ready to identify those who are going to burn.

Barbara Brown Taylor noted about these self-appointed judges of the human population that "They know who the Antichrist is and [when and] where the Messiah will appear. These are the people who have bumperstickers on their cars that say, "Warning: In case of the rapture, the driver of this car will disappear." Lately I have been seeing some others that say, "When the rapture comes, can I have your car?"

She is making the point that many, possibly most, Christians can be noted for their arrogance as much as their bad theology.

But, here they have a point, in that Jesus, in our scripture today, is speaking with people who sense of the ending of the world -- and this includes us, 2000 years later. So the question remains: Is this the eschaton, the end of days, when all shall be destroyed? Can things get any worse?

I think we know the answer to that last question - of course things can get worse. And I think Jesus is answering the other two questions in our passage

directly. Are we on the edge of Armageddon? Are things winding down existentially? Jesus answers with a yes - we are heading towards the end of the world, AS WE ALWAYS ARE!

What an infuriating answer of those who operate under timelines and schedules! We want specifics, date and time, what will happen and to whom. But the answer of Jesus is the only one that rings true, if we understand what this passage is truly about - not prediction, but preparation. For the fact is that the world is always ending in some way or other to various degrees in different contexts; many worlds were ended with the shootings and stabbings of the past few weeks; our recent elections saw the aspirations of many candidates come to an end; this Conference cycle we saw three churches close, no longer able to function as viable ministries; and five churches ended their connection with us as they disaffiliated.

Endings are a part of life, says Jesus. Endings are inevitable, says our experience as humans. And many of those endings are shocking, life-robbing, destructive events, a pain every one of us has experienced in one form or another. An important question arises - how many of those shocking, life-robbing, destructive events were completely predictable? I would hazard a guess that not many of them were. The shock was that of the unexpected, the unanticipated occurring in the midst of what we think of as normal life. But there really is no such thing, is there? At least, not in an uninterrupted continuum; what we deem to be normal is more accurately understood as "normal for now," with "now" being a rather neurotic variable.

It is in this sense that prediction is foolishness if we are concerned with matters of immanent endings and apocalyptic transformations. This is the point of Jesus, who states it clearly when he says in verse 36 -- "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." If Jesus and the angels don't know, we certainly cannot know. So what makes us anxious about this, other than it is the ending of all that we have known and experienced in the form of life we now possess?

The answer lies in our chosen focus of life - either towards the world or beyond the world. Choose the main focus of life to be that of the broken world around us, and you invite the anxiety that festers in that brokenness and fixates upon its doom. Choose the main focus of life to be that which lies beyond the world, and you invite the peace that lies beyond ourselves and remains open to hope. This is a peace and a hope that enables us to effectively live in the world; it

will not be found in the world alone. Just as one must look beyond what is to see what will be, what will be must be considered before what is can be fully lived into. In other words, to live fully in the present, we must remember the past, consider the future, but all for the purpose of making the most of the now.

I feel that I lost you just now, so let's put it another way. WHAT YOU FOCUS ON DETERMINES YOUR ORIENTATION TO LIFE; what you center yourself in determines your equilibrium or lack thereof. And we people of faith have chosen to focus on God's hope for the world, not the world's hope for itself. We center ourselves in Jesus, his life, teaching, and love, his worldview and heavenview, in order to live in this world with hope and potential that do not depend upon this world. As people guided by faith, we are perhaps more aware than others of what is broken for we are meant to heal and repair what we can; but as people of faith, we are perhaps more capable of staying in the fray, for we do not depend upon the world for our motivation or empowerment. We look beyond the world to heal the world; we look beyond ourselves to the presence of another who can help us do what we cannot do alone. We pay a different attention to the world for the sake of that world in which we live; we are more prepared to live in this world for the regular practice we have of living for another.

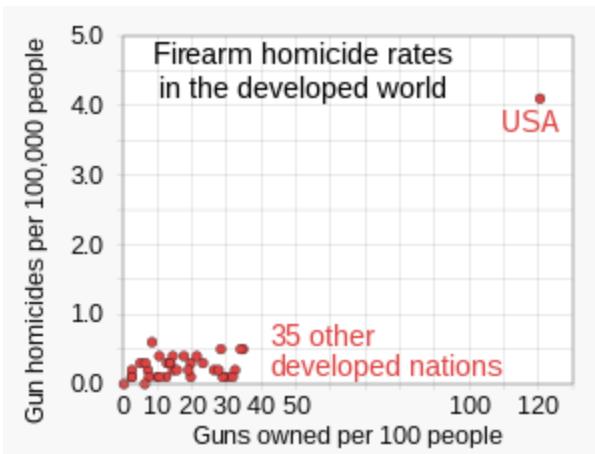
(From Unfolding Light by Steve Garnaas Holmes)

Keep awake. Watch. Notice.

You don't know when  
the Beloved will appear,  
when the world will shift—  
the bird at the window,  
the bum on the street,  
the prison door.

The fearful court your coma,  
and disparage the opening of your eyes.  
Ignore them.  
Stay woke.

Deep Blessings,  
Pastor Steve



The End of the World Is Coming Soon!—Unless It Doesn't!

False prophets and pseudoreligion

by [Ken Ham](#) on August 4, 2022