

Matthew 24:36–44 (NRSV)

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 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. 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. 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.

Steady in the Face of the Unknown

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: December 1, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44

The other day I Googled the phrase ‘predict the future.’ I wanted to see if there was any interest in the subject out there in the world of cyberspace. Well, it turns out there was, some interest. In 0.39 seconds Google dutifully presented me with 81,200,000 results. The highest ranked entry was titled, “21 Times “The Simpsons” Bizarrely Predicted the Future.” But with 81,199,999 other results to get through, I skipped the Simpsons. I wanted something more personal, so I went to number three on the list, “Predict Your Future Here.” The site offered to answer any question I would ask it about my future. So, I typed in, *will my sermon stink?* The computer cogitated for a few moments. I found it convincing that the computer had to think longer than the 0.39 seconds it took to find 81,200,000 search results. Soon, though, the computer responded, “That’s a difficult question... My crystal ball is giving me the following answer: love and attention will bring the desired outcome.” As gullible as I am, it was pretty obvious that this prediction, while perhaps true, didn’t really tell me anything I didn’t already know about my future, and certainly nothing that would take a crystal ball to figure out.

I wanted a more specific answer, and something, well, useful, too. So, I Googled, *will Ben and Jerry’s stock rise this week?* This gave me over 2,000,000 results, but as far as I could tell, none of them answered the question; none of them ventured whether the stock would rise this week. I thought I’d give it one more try. I Googled, *will the Patriots win this week?* Even with 92,000,000 results for that search, there seemed a dearth of speculation about today’s game. Interestingly, there was a prediction left over from last week. It read: *NFL Week 12 picks: Patriots won’t stop Broncos offense.* You may remember that by halftime of that game, that prediction was looking pretty good. The Broncos led 24-0. But I am sure all of you were watching as I was when in the wee hours of Monday morning Stephan Gostowski kicked a field goal and the Patriots won 34-31 as time was winding down in overtime. As it turned out, The Patriots did stop the Broncos offense.

Oh well, I was glad for the outcome of the game, but any hopes I had that I could fatten my retirement account by learning to predict the future seemed pretty hopeless. The future is a tricky thing to predict. As Jesus says in this morning’s parable, “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.” But the owner had no idea when the thief was coming. Jesus tells his listeners, “Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

As a side note, we should say a little about just what Jesus means when he says, “You do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” The early Christian church believed that the end-times were coming soon, and that Jesus’ second coming was right around the corner. There are many Christians still today who believe in the end times and Jesus’ second coming. This morning’s passage has supported books, like *The Left Behind* series, which say the rapture is coming, and some will be taken up into glory and some will be left behind. Our passage this morning supports this idea. It says, when the Lord comes “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.”

But even in the early years some in the church began to have doubts or questions. As the years went by in those beginning days of Christianity, the early church began to wonder why the end times hadn't come as predicted. Some began to wonder whether they had misunderstood Jesus' message. Others just assumed that they had gotten the time-frames wrong. Two thousand years later we have pretty much the same options. Some think the second coming is, well, coming, and others think we need to understand Jesus' words less literally and find a different meaning in them. I tend to fall into this latter group, but in a way, the right answer is not all that important. As Christians we believe that, one way or another, the end is coming, even if it's just our own death we are talking about. The end is coming, and one way or another, there will be a score to tally. Even the atheist will face a review of his life. The end is coming. But the truth of the matter, we know not when. Not even 81,200,000 Google results can tell you that.

Now, Jesus rightly tells us that if we knew the day or the hour that the thief was coming we would be ready. It would be easy. You know the thief is coming at 3:00 in the morning on this coming Thursday. You call the police. They send a team of armed officers, which gets to the house an hour or so ahead of time and waits at your house for the thief to arrive. Right on schedule, at 3:00 in the morning on Thursday, the thief comes. The officers jump out and surprise him. They arrest him, send him to jail, and that's all there is to it. Same thing if we knew tomorrow's closing price for Ben and Jerry's stock. If we can buy it in the morning for less than we know we can sell it in the afternoon, then we will empty our bank accounts and buy as much of the stock as possible. Or if you can tell me this morning the score of this afternoon's Patriots game, I can bet everything I own on the game.

My point isn't so much for us to fantasize about having the power to tell the future. My point isn't to get us thinking about how rich we could be if we knew the football score in advance or how safe we could be if we knew when the thief was coming. My point is that what we would do if we knew what was going to happen gives almost no insight about what to do when in fact we don't know what's going to happen.

Jesus says that if we knew when the thief was coming, we'd be awake. But we don't know, so he says, "Stay awake!" That's ridiculous. Is Jesus saying that the home owner should stay awake 24 hours a day, seven days a week, because he doesn't know when the thief is coming? Should the homeowner call the police and say, "I think a thief is going to come to my house some day, at some hour that I don't know, so, would you mind having an around the clock police detail permanently assigned to my house? And surely Jesus wouldn't advise me to bet everything I own on this afternoon's football game, based on the idea that if I don't bet, I might miss making a fortune. Or, take another football analogy. If on a certain play in this afternoon's game the Patriots knew for sure that it's going to be a pass to Andre Johnson, they would just send every defender they have to cover him. But since they don't know what the play is going to be, they would court disaster if they sent all their defenders to cover one receiver. Not knowing the future changes everything. Whatever Jesus is saying when he says, "Stay awake," it most assuredly cannot be as simple as act exactly the same way you would if you knew the future.

Whatever Jesus means when he says, "Stay awake," he surely means for us to think beyond the idea of laying in wait day and night for the thief to come. I think Jesus, as he often does, tells this story in a way that is meant to get our attention. He says that the house is unprotected, vulnerable to the thief. But the proposed solution is a little off. It gets us thinking. I think Jesus is getting us to realize that most of us aren't prepared for that inevitable tallying of

scores, that inevitable look back over our life that awaits us. We are as poorly prepared as the homeowner's unguarded house. And he gets us thinking what do about it.

I once read a story of a woman who was struck by lightning as she stood on her porch. The bolt was so close that it hit simultaneously with white light and crashing thunder. Her husband ran outside from the kitchen only to find his wife lying on the ground motionless. The man was inconsolably distraught. His wife, with whom he had chatted moments before, was now dead on the porch. But, as fortune would have it, to everyone's surprise the woman actually came to. She survived the strike with no lasting damage. Afterwards her husband reported that since that day he has treasured his wife more than ever before, for he knew by experience that at any instant she could be taken from him. So how did this change him? He did not mean that since that day he constantly smothered his wife day in and day out all day long with clutching embraces while he mournfully kept repeating, "I love you so much. I just want hold you and kiss you all the time because you might be gone in the next instant." What he did mean was that he never took his wife for granted again. He better understood just what a gift she was in his life. He better appreciated her and that the future was never guaranteed and that caring when you have the chance is more important than we often realize.

One of the ancient Rabbis, Rabbi Akiva, used to say that it was easy for a person to enter the kingdom of God. The only thing a person needed to do to enter the Kingdom of God was to confess his transgressions and pray for forgiveness on the last day of his life. What Rabbi Akiva knew was that no one could be sure when that last day would be. The only way to be sure of the kingdom of God would be to confess one's transgressions and pray for forgiveness every day. Rabbi Akiva was saying simply that one should live mindful of the tally we will one day face and keep the ledger as balanced as possible. Jesus said it another way: stay awake.

If nothing else this season of Advent means to jolt us from the humdrum of our familiar patterns, the humdrum that too often lets us sleepwalk through our living. Advent is meant to awaken us to the tenderness of life. It is meant to awaken us not so much to the idea that this moment could be our last as it is to awaken us to living life such that if this moment is our last we will be able to say that we lived life well while we had it. Stay awake means not to startle yourself into awareness of life's potential disasters, but to live with steady attentiveness to the things that matter. Stay awake. Amen.