

# Matthew 24:36–44

*James Nestingen · CROSS Talk*

Taught for the First Sunday of Advent, Year A (Revised Common Lectionary) · 26 November 2013

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Some years ago, on the First Sunday of Advent, a blizzard hit, one of the kind for which this part of the world is famous, closing all the streets in Minneapolis. Because the roads were closed, my wife and I walked a couple of blocks through the snow with our two kids (we had two at that time) to a little Swedish Lutheran church. The pastor was one of the great old pastors. He had been in that congregation forever. He knew everybody, and he was baptizing the grandchildren of people he had baptized. He was a neighborhood institution. We weren't allowed to go there, because we were in different synods in those days and that made the bureaucrats anxious. So we drove by every Sunday, but that Sunday we walked over and stopped in.

He was a great preacher, and I knew it. But that day his associate was preaching, a young seminary graduate who had his head full of Hal Lindsey and a recent movie called *A Thief in the Night*. He got hold of this text, stood up, and compared the return of Christ in judgment to a python escaped from the city zoo, lurking through the neighborhoods, hiding under garages, ready to pounce on anybody without warning. This, of course, was to urge us to alertness. I was watching Pastor Oberg while this abomination was unfolding. He was shifting from side to side and getting more and more anxious, and I nudged my dear Carolyn and said, "You just wait for the closing prayer. This is going to be one of the great closing prayers we've ever heard."

So the preacher sat down, and Einar Oberg took up the offering and said to the congregation, "Let us pray." He bowed his head and said, "We thank you, O Lord, that there is nothing serpentine about you, but that you have crushed the serpent's head beneath your heel; and that when you encoil us, you do not constrict us, but wrap us in the arms of your love." It was just fabulous. We went from hell to heaven, and fast: from one of the worst sermons I ever heard to one of the best. That closing prayer of old Pastor Oberg's went on for fifteen minutes, and nobody in the congregation wanted it to stop. It was just great.

## Law and Gospel in Advent

This is something of the character of Advent. On the one hand there is something threatening about it, as we'll see in the texts. As we begin the church year, we begin with texts that tell us of the end, just as we ended last week with the end. And that end is not a matter of progress or development or seamless continuity. The old must die, and the new must come. For all of us who have an investment in the old, who have keyed our lives to it, who have been caught up in the standards and strictures of this age, the end of the old comes as a threat, and not only a threat but a disaster. Somebody is going to lose, and lose big time, and that's us sinners.

At the same time, the coming of the new is the coming of Christ Jesus. He is coming in judgment, to be sure, but he has already tipped his hand about the judgment concerning you. You've been baptized. You have heard him say over and over again at the table, "This is my body, given for you." So you know what the judgment is going to be, and even in the midst of disaster we can look forward to his great blessing in confidence and hope.

So we have law and gospel intertwined in these texts, distinguishable to be sure, but never separable. Advent has that character. It's a season of repentance, a season of being tuned up by the hope given to us in Christ Jesus, and so there is something of death and resurrection about it, even as we approach Christmas.

We have an interesting tension in the Old Testament texts. Isaiah has heard the promise at its most expansive and sets it out that way: Israel's election is for the nations of the earth. Psalm 122 has a somewhat more enclosed vision. The good news is there, to be sure, but it's turned toward Israel, toward the people in a particular way. So we could say that Isaiah expands what the psalm wants to hold on to. When we get to the New Testament texts, they're just about exploding with promise, especially Romans, of course, but Matthew 24 as well. Still, the promise is wrapped and trapped, so we'll have to sort through and see if we can make the distinction.

## Isaiah 2: Swords into Plowshares

We'll begin with Isaiah 2:1–5. The whole passage is premised on the election of Israel. That election is expressed above all in Genesis 15, God's covenant, God's promise to Abraham, which is unilateral. It is God's doing. God makes the promise, and God will carry it out. In Isaiah, this promise of Genesis 15 combines with God's promise to Solomon that he will dwell in the temple and be accessible to the people of Israel there.

But once Isaiah gets hold of this promise, he treats it very much as Ruth and Jonah do. The promise to Israel is not an end but a beginning. God has the nations in mind, all the nations of the earth. The election of Israel is not privilege but calling. It opens up to all the earth, and all the earth will be included. So we have in Advent expansive promises, covering everything, including all.

So Israel's election is expressed in words like these: "In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills." It's particular up to this point. But now: "all the nations shall stream to it." Here is Israel's election for all the peoples of the earth. "Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.'" So people are being drawn to the people of Israel, because out of Israel this hope is being expressed.

And besides people coming, the Word is going to go out. "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Up to this point people are coming to Jerusalem, to Mount Zion, but now out of Jerusalem shall go the law and the word of the Lord. "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples." So God is coming in judgment to reclaim the earth. He claimed Israel as he judged Israel, electing the people of Israel. Now he is going out to all the peoples of the earth for the same purpose, calling them back.

And as a result of this judgment we get one of the most beautiful and famous passages in the Old Testament: "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." Because this is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who elected Israel and is now reclaiming the earth for himself, conflict ends here. He is restoring the earth to itself. "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" Beautiful.

This is old Isaiah singing his heart out. We're going to get text after text from Isaiah through Advent and into Epiphany, one of the great preachers ever. So here he has set us up for the First Sunday.

## Psalm 122: Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem

By comparison Psalm 122 appears kind of enclosed and particularist, and for that reason, set beside Isaiah 2, it isn't quite as attractive. As you all know, I love these songs. But sometimes you get a song like this one that's just a little disappointing. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" Here is the promise, the same promise Isaiah has heard, the promise given through Solomon that God will reside in this house and be accessible in it. "Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem." Here it expands from the temple to the whole city, as is customary. "Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound firmly together": that is, at unity with itself. Well, you don't have to go very far to find disunity, but Jerusalem is at unity with itself, at least for the time being.

So we have the vision: "To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord." That's Israel's hope. In fact the nation of Israel is divided into two kingdoms, and Jerusalem is the center of only one of them. But there is unity in Jerusalem, as it is said. "For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May they prosper who love you.'" Of course that's necessary, because Jerusalem is hardly ever at peace, as we know from recent history and biblically and from all the intervening years.

Now listen to this. In Isaiah all the nations will come; the Word will go out to the nations of the earth; it will be the end of conflict. The end of conflict is hoped for here too: "Peace be within your walls." But in Isaiah the hope has broken out of the walls. Here we're perilously close to election viewed as privilege rather than calling, and that starts to get a little troublesome. "For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, 'Peace be within you.' For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good." I suppose if Psalm 122 hadn't been set up against Isaiah 2, it would look a little better. This is something we hope for and can legitimately hope for. But in contrast to the inclusion in Isaiah 2, the enclosure of Psalm 122 shows. So Isaiah is ahead, two to one maybe, we could say. At least this is very promising for us Gentiles, who are overhearing this conversation from the outside.

## Romans 13: Knowing the Time

When we come to Romans 13 and Matthew 24, we see this wrapping and intertwining of law and gospel. As I said earlier, to distinguish is not to separate. Law and gospel are generally two dimensions of the same word. "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods": that's

command on the one hand, and the greatest promise ever made on the other. You get command and promise back to back in the same words. Law and gospel are two dimensions of the same word, the same God speaking both. So we have a text from Romans in which the expanse of good news is set out, and it becomes an engine for the most practical, down-to-earth responsibilities we face.

The passage begins in parentheses. I generally like to ignore these parentheses, because they signify that the people who did the lectionary are hiding something from us, so it's good to go in there and root around a little. What we've got here is the summary of the law. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Luther used to say that if you want to get your hands dirty, follow the commandments, because the commandments will lead you into the earthly responsibilities of every day.

But watch what happens in the following verses. The imminence of the end, the red-hot expectation of Christ's coming, is going to intensify and radicalize the commandments, push them. New Testament scholars sometimes call this eschatological heightening. I think that's valuable, because it indicates what's happening. It's hope that is driving here. The hope of the end has gotten hold of the commandments and intensified them. You hear things like this from Jesus: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I say to you." And in a sense Paul is doing the same thing. He starts with the commandments, but now watch what happens. "Besides this": there's Paul. What an interesting mind. "Besides this," and "how much more," another of his great phrases I always love. "Besides this, you know what time it is."

See what happens? The commandments stand on the one side, but now, you know the time, and knowing the time is going to make a great big difference. "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." And why is that true? "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." The time is approaching; it's coming close, coming nearer.

I wonder sometimes whether faith doesn't always live with this intensification. You could look for specific events and say it was a figment of Paul's imagination. But faith is like that. Faith is always after its Lord. Faith wants its Lord, looks for its Lord, and always expects him around

the corner. I had a great student whose father was a veterinary salesman with a territory near Chicago. He would leave on Monday, visit all the vets, and come back Friday. And my student, whom I love, told me that by the time Friday came he and his two brothers would be living on tiptoe, because they expected Dad to be around the corner. As the time got closer, they became more and more concerned to have things done and get them right, so that when Dad came home everything would be great.

You know how that works. When Carolyn goes away, I start counting the days, and about half a day before she gets here I start doing all the dishes and cleaning up the mess so I don't get caught, airing out the garage so the smell of pipe smoke doesn't alert her to my sins, as if she doesn't know. Anyway, here you get this sense of eschatological heightening, the commandments being ratcheted up by the nearness of the end. "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." That's what is coming. What's coming is not mere disaster, though it has a dimension of disaster. What's coming is salvation. So wake up. Get with it. "Wake, awake, for night is flying; the watchmen on the heights are crying." He's coming. He's near. He's approaching. "Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near."

So now the time has, in effect, become an exponent of the law. The time ratchets up the demand. And here's what follows: "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." What are the works of darkness? As we'll see, they are the works of the flesh, the normal self-seeking, the *incurvatus in se*, in which we become our own subject and our own goal and work on ourselves piously: I'm going to achieve, accomplish, do, and in the process lose sight of Christ altogether. "Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." And what is the armor of light? The gospel, the Word. There it is. Let it soak into you that Christ is coming, that he is coming soon, and that he has salvation in his wings.

Now we get a really interesting passage. This is so much fun; I just love it. "Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy." Where did that come from? These are the works of the flesh. Now, you know how Paul has shifted this. In ordinary Greco-Roman thinking, flesh and spirit is a distinction between the body and the soul. But in Paul the soul is fleshly. The soul becomes fleshly when it seeks itself, when it becomes preoccupied with itself, with its sanctification and achievements, its self-transcendence and all its great

accomplishments. That is the flesh as surely as a night of debauchery downtown is the flesh. Both are our self-seeking.

So quarreling and jealousy and sexual immorality are on a par. They're different versions of the same sin. Both are driven by a self locked in on itself, looking for itself, not freed from itself and so bound to itself. Let it go, and it's like a weighted bottle: it just spins toward the flesh. It's attracted there. "Let us live honorably as in the day. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Right away, of course, because of the word "desires," we think of sexual stuff. In fact sexual stuff is just one among very many forms of self-pursuit. For Paul, and for Luther, religion is the most basic form of self-pursuit. We seek ourselves religiously, just as we seek ourselves in the body of another. We seek our own fulfillment, and Christ Jesus has nothing to do with it. And so we lie in bed and fantasize about self-release, or about vengeance on our enemies, nursing old angers and hatreds, rehearsing rehearsals of retaliation and revenge, turning back to the self, turning back to the self.

All right, wake up, Paul says. Look ahead: Christ is coming. He's coming now. There's not a trace of moralism here, not one trace of it. Moralism seeks the self in the law. This frees you from yourself so that you can go about your business. This is you being brought down to earth, freed from the flesh for the life of the Spirit, in the Word, with your neighbor, in the creaturely delights of every day, now received not as fleshly self-pursuits but as gifts of grace.

It's really fun. On Tuesdays we take care of our little granddaughter, who is just developing. You'll probably hear a lot about her. She's just fabulous, little Aleta. She's named after Carolyn's auntie Aleta, who was a great woman, and Aleta is showing every promise in that direction. There's nothing she loves better than chocolate doughnuts, and of course Grandpa is going to make sure she has a full supply before she waddles out of here to go home. Well, I just gave her a quarter of one. She too will have to leave the flesh behind for the things of the Spirit. But a chocolate doughnut won't hurt for the time being. I've had too many of them myself, so I'm not going to let her go uncorrupted.

## **Matthew 24: No One Knows the Day**

Now we go to Matthew 24. This is a passage where that young pastor preoccupied with the python could actually make some appeal. Here the expectation is negative and the images are negative. We have legal images, images that condemn and chide and damn, and from Jesus'

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

In one sense that’s promising. Only the Father knows the time, so all other claims about the time are exposed as fraudulent. That only the Father knows the time liberates us from false claims about the time. But finally it’s kind of sinister. No one knows the time. No one knows when it’s going to happen. It could be momentarily, could be now, could be tomorrow. We were talking the other day with a friend whose uncle had gone to the doctor. He was feeling well and just went in for his checkup. The doctor told him he had cancer, and he died in twenty-four hours. Bang. No one knows the time. There are particular times in our lives when we are very sensitive to the time and alert to the fact that things could change very quickly, and the change could be dramatic. That’s a threat.

And the threat is underscored. “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.” You remember that great old Bill Cosby routine where he interviews Noah: “What are you doing, Noah?” “Well, I’m just building a boat.” “You expecting rain, Noah?” It’s comical in one sense, but it’s as frightening as it can be in another, especially when we know these disasters can erupt out of nowhere, and when they come, everything can be reoriented. So we’re being warned. Here you have no earthly city. Nothing shelters you from exposure to just this kind of thing.

“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.” Here’s the rapture passage, which, among other things, is a source of great humor for those of us who are a little less confident than our neighbors. These people who run around with rapture stickers: “In case of rapture, this car will self-destruct.” And then of course there’s the other bumper sticker: “In case of rapture, give me your keys.” There’s been all kinds of foolishness about this passage, especially from people convinced that they are among the elect and that we sleepy-headed Lutherans and the rest of the Christians are among the condemned. That’s fairly common stuff here in the States, anyway. So again there’s a kind of threat to it. Two people working side by side: one is taken and the other left. All of a sudden things have changed dramatically, and not necessarily for the good, at least apparently. Right in front of you, it doesn’t look good.

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” And now we get another image that is just as troubling. “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.” At least we could say this: when there are thieves in the area, burglar-alarm installations go up. If we knew when the thief was coming, we’d take steps.

So we have the coming of the end compared to Noah building his ark and the flood coming unawares over all the rest of the people. We have the coming of the end compared to a rapture, where one is taken and another left. And we have the kingdom compared to a burglary. What’s going on with these images? In fact they all point in the same direction. The kingdom of God is not something we create or achieve or bring in. Like begets like. When sinners start reproducing, they create sinners. When we start building projects, we build immortality projects, towers of Babel. It reminds me of an old article in the *Atlantic* that said buildings in Saudi Arabia are not erected for the sake of the building but for the sake of the bribery that goes into the building. Something of the same is true among us sinners: the building isn’t erected for any good purpose but to serve the sinners who are building it.

So the *incurvatus* has to break. There is not going to be simple, unbroken continuity from this world to the next. There is going to be a purging, a breaking, a death, and that death is what is being described here. It’s going to be like the days of Noah. Or it’s going to be like going to sleep and waking up to discover your beloved is gone. Or it’s going to be like being burglarized: coming home and finding all your goods spread out on the floor and feeling the violation of having your stuff heisted, explored, and taken. That’s what it’s like. So there’s a death, a loss, a breach. An incredible canyon opens between this creation and the new creation. And that breach has such a big investment in this passage that the positive expectation, the hope, the joy that generally drives these passages is hidden. It’s masked.

## Your Lord Is Coming

I spent quite a bit of time with Steve Paulson a couple of weeks ago, and I’ve been thinking ever since about his work with Luther’s distinction between the preached and the unpreached God. All this negative stuff is being preached, but behind it all stands the hidden God. You don’t know what that hidden God is going to do. You don’t know where the hidden God, the unpreached God, will erupt. But you know that when this God bears in, there’s disaster. In

contrast is the preached God, the God who comes out of hiding, who reveals himself by concealing himself in the promise of the Word.

And that concealed revelation is here too. There are just two little parts of the text that are promissory, and they're implicit, so you've got to hold on for dear life through all the shaking in the passage. Hold on for dear life, because the gospel is here. It's here, but it's stated so softly and gently that we could pass right over it. "One will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day" who is coming? "Your Lord." In all the storm, in all the excitement, in all the threat, who is coming? Your Lord. And again at the end: "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Who's coming? Your Lord, the Son of Man.

Now who is that? This is the God who has been preached to us. This is the God who was born in a manger, with old Joseph rubbing his nose in the kid's belly. This is the Lord who was dandled at Mary's breast, running his hands over her, pushing, nursing, seeking. This is the Lord who put his hand on Peter's mother-in-law and called her out of the fever. This is the Lord; this is the Son of Man. This is the one who expresses himself by giving himself away, the one who, as we saw last Sunday, looked into the maw of death and reached out to save the sinner next to him.

So who's coming? The Lord is coming. The Son of Man is coming. And that Lord, the Son of Man, is the one who is coming to make all things new. There is disaster for the old; that's true. We can't hold on to what the old Adam has been using all these years and making every effort to use. We can't hold on to the flesh. That's going to break; it will die. But the Spirit is arising, new and green and lush, bringing in the new. So we look for it, and we wait for it, and we count on it. That's what keeps us awake. That's what keeps us on our tiptoes. And for that reason we just don't have time for the indulgences of the flesh. It's too urgent. He might be here in a minute; who knows?

And that's the best news you ever heard in your whole life, because the one who is coming is the one who takes your sins away. The one who is coming is the one who has sucked up your past into his blood. The one who is coming is the one who delivers, frees, saves, raises, and makes all things new. He is bringing in the new creation. So there is good reason to wait. Out of the negative, out of the law, out of the condemnation, a new word is arising. As Jesus himself says in the context, "Look up, because your redemption is drawing near." Even in this disaster it is drawing near.

Well, these are wonderful texts. Every once in a while I used to give Einar Oberg a bad time about that closing prayer. He was impenitent. “It was needed,” he said. And of course that’s exactly what it was: desperately needed. Because it’s so easy to let Hal Lindsey and the religious right take these apocalyptic passages away and turn them into bunkum, into threats to manipulate people, Tea Party stuff, to enclose. This is the good stuff. This is pure promise. And what you want to do in preaching these passages is to focus on those implicit but still explicit promises: cloaked, but coming out into the open; hidden, yet revealed; implicit, but on the tip of your tongue explicit. Because Christ Jesus in Advent is sending you as a messenger of the end, and all kinds of fun are going to break out.

God bless you. We’ve begun another season, and we’re going to rejoice in it. We’re going to come to some of the great passages of the Christmas season. I just love it. So power to you, and we’ll be in touch.

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SOURCE

*CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 26 November 2013 (about 45 minutes).*

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvYYmgEfdQk>

*Edited from the recording for reading.*