

Sunday, November 28, 2010: Matthew 24:36-44

by [Mary Schertz](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue

As a child, I remember hearing in church about the second coming and Jesus returning. Long before the Left Behind series arrived, I heard the mournful strains of "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" around our church campfires.

One moonlit summer night on my family's farm, I woke up. Enchanted with the rare opportunity to be alone, I wandered around outside. The wind was picking up and a storm was coming in from behind the cedar windbreak. The full moon slid behind a large cloud. It was eerie—and stunningly beautiful. The storm cloud, lit from behind, had a bright center and dark edges. When it broke, the moon sent shafts of light toward the earth. I was pretty sure that Jesus would soon be riding in for his second coming and wondered what he might do if he found only one person out in the field instead of two—so I ran inside to check on my sleeping family. My siblings were all accounted for, but both parents were getting up to close windows in an entirely mundane manner. It was all the answer I required—I went back to bed.

The passage in Matthew contains several small parables of watchfulness. In the days of Noah, the people watched Noah build the ark, collect his menagerie and his family, and go in and shut the door. Yet they then went on with life—until the deluge. The other small parables are similar in tone. Two men are in a field; two women are grinding flour—one of the pair is ready but the other gets left behind.

Jesus gives the point of these parables in 24:42. Disciples should be alert so that they are not taken unaware when the Lord returns to claim his own. Disciples, he goes on to say in 43 and 44, should not be like the householder who relaxes the security of his home because he does not know when the thief might come. Instead, disciples should be like the householder who maintains the integrity of his security at all times.

Whatever role this kind of eschatological thinking played in Jesus' mind and life, or however it functioned for Matthew and his community, contemporary believers rarely find it compelling. In part our unease has to do with a destructive alliance between a politics of fear and certain religious proclivities. Even aside from that

unfortunate circumstance, however, we are put off by this rhetoric and these images. They do not seem to fit well with a theology of trust and a sense of the goodness of God's creation. In fact, if these passages did not come up with such regularity in our lectionaries, many of us would ignore them.

Despite the strangeness of these texts to 21st-century ears and hearts, and despite an appropriate caution born of dubious uses, apocalyptic language and eschatological ideas have a role to play in our lives as believers. One reason is that they are part of our sacred text. If we excise all the passages that do not sit well with us, we will domesticate the Bible. We will lose its capacity to be "other," to confront us, to read us as we read it. A second reason is that as we jettison this language and mind-set we largely jettison notions of decision and judgment. That's a problem. Discipleship, even in our setting of entitlement and relativism, is still a matter of commitment and a standard of judgment.

Certainly we are aware of the inadequacies and failures of earlier notions of decision and judgment. We have heard more than enough about God's awful frown. Unremitting divine disapproval is too many people's primary experience of God. Chaplains and hospice workers remind me that many Christians come to the end of life without assurance. If only coming to Jesus were not a matter of fear and all Christians could die with a sense of being wrapped in the arms of God.

The table fellowship that Jesus hosts in the synoptic Gospels is one of the primary settings of and symbols for the grace that God offers. The table is open for all—no one is coerced. The only exclusions are self-exclusions, those who choose not to come. Those who come are transformed. They leave the table as different persons with new instructions, new commitments and new relationships.

Perhaps the image of table fellowship is what finally helps us integrate the apocalyptic and eschatological imagery of the Bible with the unconditional love of God. Our response is required. Human life is not without limits. Without coming to the table and without being open to what happens at the table, we cannot participate in its fellowship. God's unconditional love and human response to that love are not oppositions but integral movements in the dance we know as grace. God's fierce beauty and ever-comforting arms are one.