

November 30, Advent 1 (Matthew 24:36-44)

We are called to be ready, to be alert to God's kingdom breaking in anywhere, anytime.

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue

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I can't read this Matthew text without getting a knot in my stomach. It takes me back to my childhood, when I had to sit through hellfire and brimstone sermons during revival meetings at my church. I already had a supersensitive conscience. The preaching convinced me I was going to hell. I would be one of those not taken but left behind at the Second Coming.

What were my parents thinking by subjecting me to such spiritual abuse? What was my church thinking?

Confession: I'm an agnostic when it comes to the reality of hell. I try to imagine the worst thing one of my kids could possibly do. Could I condemn them to eternal perdition for that, no matter how dastardly the deed? No, as their parent I could not. And I don't think our heavenly parent could do that either. God's judgment is a reality, not to be taken lightly. But I'm with theologian John P. Burgess, who said, "God's judgment never contradicts or overrides God's grace." Besides, the image of fire in the Bible is often more purgative than punitive, purifying rather than condemning.

This apocalyptic gospel text has sparked many debates. Some think it refers to the Second Coming, specifically to a rapture in which the faithful will be gathered up and the rest left behind. It is quite astounding that some Christians think they can know and predict the time of Christ's coming. This takes some hubris, when Matthew claims that even the angels and Jesus himself can't know God's future. Incidentally, some biblical interpreters were offended by the notion that even the Son of man can't know. In response, they expunged that phrase from the text.

Church history is replete with instances of self-appointed prophets who think they know when and sometimes even where Christ will come again. When it doesn't happen, they revise the timetable, again and again. In my own Mennonite tradition, the charismatic Claas Epp Jr. led a 19th-century group of German-speaking Mennonites from Russia to Central Asia, where he thought Christ would return. Their hopes dashed, they settled into an otherwise Muslim village, where their whitewashed church was referred to as the white mosque. (For an intriguing and skillful retelling of this story, [read Sofia Samatar's *The White Mosque: A Memoir*, reviewed in the April 2023 issue.](#))

Other interpreters have noted that Matthew says these events will happen when those present to hear Jesus' foretelling are still living. They believe this most likely foreshadows the destruction of the temple and the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. It could also refer to our own deaths. As St. Benedict said, "Remember every day, you will die." Or it could refer to the breaking in of God's kingdom in the here and now, God's reign of peace and justice, of mercy and joy, of plenty for all.

Regardless, this passage calls us to readiness and alertness. Though we must go about our lives, eating and drinking and getting married, we should have a sense that something greater can and yet will happen. The oft-times dour Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) can be helpful. He says that all is vanity— "vapor" is a better translation

of the Hebrew *hebel*)—yet we should nevertheless enjoy the good things of this life: food, drink, work, our lifelong mates (Eccles. 2:24–26, 8:15).

In the Revised Common Lectionary, the first Sunday of Advent always includes an apocalyptic text like this one. It helps us to see the big picture of God's sovereignty. We live between the times, between God's past and God's future. Just as we can find hope and courage in God's calling out Israel, raising up a savior from Israel, and forming a community of disciples around him, we can look ahead to a time when God will make all things new.

Meanwhile, we are called to be ready, to be alert. Ready for our own death, to be sure, but also ready and alert to God's kingdom breaking in anywhere, anytime, even in the here and now.

The parables that follow cast light on this readiness and alertness: the faithful and unfaithful servant, the ten virgins and their lamps, the talents, the separation of the sheep from the goats. Jesus gives his disciples a mission upon his leavetaking. They are to preach the gospel to all nations, baptize people into the community of the faithful, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned. These are not merely human tasks, these are holy ministrations, signs of God's in-breaking reign.

Be ready, be alert. These are habits of the heart, habits we should hone during this Advent season.