

# Ready or not!

Hespeler, 27 November 2022 © Scott McAndless – Advent 1

Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, [Matthew 24:36-44](#)

When I was about seven years old, Larry Norman, who was kind of famously called the first Christian rock musician released a song that would go on to mess me, and many other young Christians, up completely. It was called “*I wish we’d all been ready*,” and part of it went like this:

*Life was filled with guns and war And all of us got trampled on the floor.  
I wish we’d all been ready,  
Children died the days grew cold A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold.  
I wish we’d all been ready.*

*There’s no time to change your mind The Son has come and you’ve been left behind.*

*A man and wife asleep in bed She hears a noise and turns her head he’s gone.*

*I wish we’d all been ready.*

*Two men walking up a hill One disappears and one’s left standing still.*

*I wish we’d all been ready.*

*There’s no time to change your mind The Son has come and you’ve been left behind.*

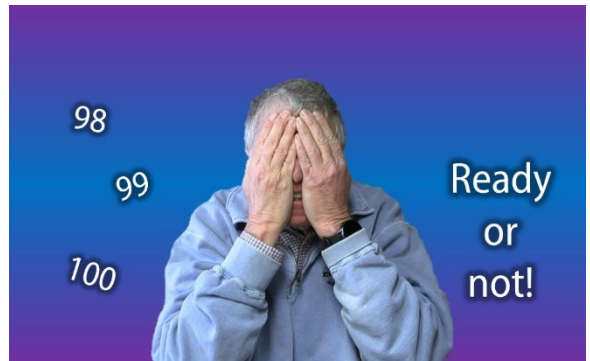
## Horrifying

This song, and Christian books I was reading at the time, presented a picture of the near future that was filled with horror and terror, even if it ultimately lead to a vision of victory for Christ and his followers. But one part of this was particularly disturbing. We were told that this terrible time predicted by the Bible would be preceded by an event called the Rapture. When this happened, the faithful followers of Christ were to be snatched up into the air, taken away alive into heaven, where they would be spared all of the turmoil and suffering of the tribulation that was to come. And this was going to happen without warning, all of a sudden people would just disappear.

It was supposed to be good news, was supposed to comfort us with the idea that we would be spared the terrors that were ahead, but I didn’t really see it that way. It was more of a cause for anxiety. What if I was not worthy? What if I was not faithful enough? What if I was left behind?

## A Disturbing Passage

The song was based on the passage we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. So, reading it again this week brought up all of those old anxieties for me. And I suspect that I am not alone. I know that succeeding generations of young Christians have grown up being traumatized by this idea of what is to happen at the end of all things and how we are to navigate it. I also know that various preachers and authors have used the idea to manipulate people by their fear. So, I



felt the need to look at what is really going on in that passage.

After Jesus had been crucified on the cross and died, his early followers were surprised to experience him alive and among them again. But then he departed, he said, for a while. But he left with the promise that he would be back and that, when he came, he would set things right in the world.

## Living in Expectation

And so those early Christians lived with a constant expectation that, at any minute, their Lord Jesus would return in power. So potent was this expectation that many of them basically put their lives on hold. They sold all of their possessions and gave them away to the poor and to the church. The Apostle Paul literally counseled people not to get married – not because there was anything wrong with marriage, but simply because he felt there wouldn't be enough time to be bothered with it. Jesus was coming back that soon.

This expectation was pervasive, and it motivated many good things, but there was a problem. The weeks, the months and then the years went by, and Jesus didn't come. And it is one thing to put your life on hold, to wait in constant expectation, for a short time, but it is very different in the long term.

## Living in Crisis Mode

Do you remember when the pandemic first started? Remember when things first shut down? We were all convinced that this was just going to last for maybe a couple of weeks, three tops. And then we would have flattened the curve and we would be able to go on with our lives. And it seemed all right to think of doing that for a few weeks because we were in crisis mode. People were being sacrificial and encouraging and doing everything they could to support others. It was kind of beautiful.

## The Mood Turns Toxic

But, when things went on for weeks and then months and now years, that sense that we could just put our lives on hold all went away. We have learned that it's just not sustainable as a society to live in crisis mode all the time. You kind of need to find a way to get on with your life. That is one thing we have learned through this pandemic.

I think there is a danger, and we have seen this throughout our experience with Covid, that when you keep a people in a state of uneasy anticipation for a long time, their mood can easily turn toxic. We have seen some of that happen as people turn against one another in the midst of the stress of the past few years and as they turn against medical and political authorities as well.

## The Q-Anon Expectation

You have maybe heard about a similar problem that has developed among some extremists in our time. Over the last 5 years or so, there was this conspiracy theory that developed and spread far and wide in the world. It is called the Q-anon conspiracy theory. This theory states that many of the most powerful celebrities and political personalities in the world today are actually figures who perpetuate absolute evil.

According to people who follow this theory, they are pedophiles who traffic children all over the world for their own purposes and power. But this theory also came with a promise. At some point, very soon, an event would occur. It was called, "The Storm." And when this happened, all of this evil would be exposed and the perpetrators would be rounded up, given a swift trial and imprisoned or maybe even executed.

And yes, it was promised that this storm was going to happen very soon. In fact, dates were set, signs were announced, and on various occasions the followers of this conspiracy theory gathered to watch eagerly for it all to happen.

## Things Turn Toxic Again

And guess what, date after date passed, sign after sign was given, and the storm just didn't happen. And what do you suppose happened to the followers of this conspiracy theory when everything they were promised didn't happen or was inexplicably delayed? Did they just give up and go home? No, they didn't. They stormed the US Capitol on January the 6<sup>th</sup>, they actually attempted to arrest police officers in Peterborough, Ontario a few months ago and they have gone on to do many other dangerous and disturbing things. It all boiled over in very dangerous excesses.

And that, my friends, is the crisis that the early church had to deal with. They had primed believers with this incredible expectation. They had them in a constant state of anticipation. Things that they promised did not occur, at least not as soon as they expected, and the emotions that they had stirred up boiled over in some potentially dangerous and certainly very disruptive ways. Good Christian brothers and sisters began to turn against one another, perhaps even to blame one another and maybe especially the leaders of the church for the delay. Who else were they to blame? They couldn't really complain about Jesus, could they? And so, the delay became a very big problem for the church, a problem that needed to be solved.

## When this Passage was Written

The passage we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew was not written in the early flush of the expectation of the return of Jesus though. Scholars believe that this particular Gospel was written somewhere around the end of the first century. And so, by the time this passage was written down, people had been waiting for almost seventy years. So that sense of waiting had definitely entered a more toxic phase.

And, though I do not doubt that the words behind this passage came from Jesus, I also know that the gospel writer did not hesitate to rework those words to address the particular needs of the church in his day. He clearly acknowledges the tension that they were all living with – the tension between being ready for God to break into your life at any moment and that basic human need to just get on with your life.

## People Getting on with their Lives

So, he speaks of it in those terms. He talks about how the people in Noah's time were getting on with their lives. **"For as in the 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."** He acknowledges the tension that the people have been living with. He recognizes that it causes enormous stress.

He then goes on to acknowledge the real crisis they are dealing with. **"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 hour you do not expect."**

## Unsustainable Crisis Mode

I'm sure you recognize the problem there. Of course, it is true that, if somebody knew that a thief was coming to break into their house at a certain hour of the night, they would be awake and ready. They would be sitting there holding their baseball bat and have 911 on speed dial. They might even call in all their friends so that they had support.

But that is just the problem, isn't it? We don't know the hour. The fact that we don't know the hour has just been underlined when Jesus says, **"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."** But if you don't know the hour, nobody can do that. No one can sit awake all night every night and continue to live and function. At some point you have to get on with your life. So that is the huge dilemma of the church of his day that the gospel writer is trying to address in this passage.

## 200 Centuries Later

He addresses the issue, but I'm not really sure that he solves it. And, of course, if people were dealing with that problem five decades after the death of Christ, where does that leave us over 200 centuries later? How do we work out that balance between being ready and getting on with our lives? I do believe that Jesus left us this teaching about being ready for a purpose. But I also believe that throughout the long history of the church, people have abused that teaching.

When I was a young man, being terrified by the songs of Larry Norman and the writings of Hal Lindsey, I do not believe that that was because those people were being faithful to what Christ was trying to teach. They were using people's fears to try and manipulate Christians for their own ends. In fact, I have since learned that that whole idea of the Rapture that so terrified me does not actually come from the Bible. It is a weird theological idea invented about a century ago that no Christians had ever seen in the Bible before that. That kind of invention and use of terror is never what Jesus intended.

That is what Jesus is saying in this verse: **"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."** He was saying that nobody, no singer, no church leader or politician or conspiracy theorist, not even the angels of heaven nor Jesus himself has the power of knowledge of what is to come. That is exclusively in the hands of God. You should let no one manipulate you or use you because they claim to have such knowledge. Far too many in the long history of the world have forgotten that lesson and have paid a heavy price.

## Keeping it a Message of Hope

The very idea of a return of Christ, the idea that God should finally break into all of the trouble of this world, is meant to be a message of hope. It is meant to be a reminder that God will not ultimately be satisfied with the shortcomings of humanity. God cares and will break through to bring hope. Those who manufacture fear in their followers have betrayed that basic hope. People do it because they think it will give them power and control over others, which is exactly what Jesus says we should not allow to happen. We must leave the control and timing up to God.

And in the meantime, we do live in that difficult tension between expecting God to break into this world and just getting on with our lives. That is not always easy. That might sometimes leave us feeling torn. But so long as we react to that tension with hope and not fear, I think we're going to be okay. At least, that is how I have come to see it. The song that haunted me when I was growing up, does not disturb me anymore. I will trust in God for my future, and that was always what Jesus intended.