

Be on the Alert  
Matthew 24:29-44

William Miller was sure, just sure that he had it all figured out. He had studied the Old Testament chronologies. He had examined all the prophecies. And he had come to the conclusion that Jesus' Second Coming would take place on October 22, 1844. And about 100,000 people came to agree with him. So, as the great day approached, many of them gave away all their belongings and sold their livestock. They made long, white garments for themselves that they called "ascension robes." But when the appointed day came and went, they were all still here.

Of course, Miller wasn't the only one to make such a mistake. In 1970, Hal Lindsey and Carole Carlson wrote "The Late Great Planet Earth," a best-selling book that pointed to the re-establishment of the state of Israel and the emergence of the European Union as evidence that Christ would return in the 1980's. Um, nope. And as recently as just a few months ago, Pat Robertson claimed that Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine was part of his plan to "move against Israel," that the war in Ukraine was thus just a "staging ground" in preparation for the Battle of Armageddon. Well, we'll see.

So, why does every generation have its share of Millers and Lindseys and Robertsons, those who examine current events and come to the conclusion that Christ's return is just around the corner? Well, it's at least in part because of the passage we studied last week. After all, in the first part of this chapter, Jesus' disciples asked Him what the signs would be of His coming. And He clearly said that wars and rumors of wars would come, that nation would arise against nation, and that there would be famines, pestilences and earthquakes in different places. So, I suppose it's only natural that whenever such events are clustered together or become especially devastating, people would expect Jesus to appear at any moment.

But here's the catch: Jesus also said that signs like these would just be the beginnings of sorrows (verse 8) – and the last two thousand years of history have proven just that. For instead of being the rare sorts of occurrences that would only happen right before His coming, these sorts of things have happened over and over again – oftentimes with devastating effect.

That's certainly true of pestilence, or disease. Sure, COVID-19 is on the rise once again, and it has already killed millions of people all over the world. But let's face it: the Bubonic plague back in the 500's was much more severe – in fact, it killed more than a quarter of the entire population of Europe. And when the same disease popped back up in the late 1340's it killed even more – between 75 and 200 million people. No, if terrible plagues were a sign of Christ's return, He would have come back well before now.

And yes, since Ukraine produces so much wheat, corn, and barley we're all concerned that the war over there will bring about food shortages and the rising prices that go along with them. But once again, Europe has seen much worse famines. Let's go back to the 1300's once again. Between 1315 and 1317 too much rain led to massive crop failures all over the continent. As a result, the price of food in England doubled, and people resorted to digging up roots and eating the bark off the trees. To make matters worse, disease broke out among the livestock, reducing their numbers by as much as 80%. When the rains finally subsided, about 10% of all the people in Southern England and Northern France had died. So, if terrible plagues and famines are going to herald the coming of Christ, why didn't He show up in the 1300's?

And yes, it's heartbreaking to see the devastation that the Russian government is causing by its invasion of Ukraine. Perhaps as many as 21,000 civilians have died in Mariupol alone, and the Russians

may have already lost 30,000 troops during the campaign. But let's face it: this is nowhere near the deadliest war Europe has ever seen. Take for example just one of the battles in World War I: the Battle of the Somme, which took place in Northern France from July to November in 1916. In that one battle there were 1 million casualties out of the 3 million soldiers that participated on both sides. In fact, more than 19,000 British soldiers died on July 1 alone.

Oh, and as World War I was winding down, the Spanish Flu was just getting started – it ended up killing more people than the war did. And just as that worldwide pandemic was burning itself out, about 5 million Russians died in a drought-induced famine between 1921 and 1922. So, no. If terrible wars and plagues and famines mean that Jesus' coming is right around the corner, He's at least 100 years late.

But there's one more problem with trying to determine the time of Jesus' coming by examining current events: Jesus Himself said it's just not possible. After all, in verse 36 He says that no one can predict the day and the hour of His coming – not even the angels in heaven. And Mark's gospel records Jesus as saying that He Himself didn't even know what time the Father would choose to send Him back to earth. So why in the world would William Miller or Hal Lindsey or Pat Robertson imagine they can figure it out? Do they imagine that they know more than the angels? Do they know more than Jesus Himself?

So, yes, given even a little knowledge of history and the Bible, it's easy enough to laugh at the overwrought imaginations and breathless pronouncements of our modern-day so-called prophets. But at the same time, we need to be careful. For just because wars and plagues and famines and earthquakes have happened over and over again, and just because there's no way to use the events of history to calculate the time of Jesus' coming – well that doesn't mean it won't happen. On the contrary, it means He could appear at any moment.

For isn't that what Peter told us in our responsive reading? Didn't he predict that in the last days, people will be tempted to scoff at the notion that Christ will come? Yes, they will look around them, at the same sorts of things that have been happening since the creation of the world – the wars and plagues, the famines and earthquakes. But they will draw the wrong conclusion: that Christ is not coming at all. They'll sneer, "Where is the promise of His coming?" and just keep doing whatever they want.

And in verse 37, Jesus agrees that the last days will indeed be much like the days of Noah: people will be going about their normal daily affairs, working in the fields or grinding grain, eating and drinking and getting married. All the signs of His coming will have come and gone, time and time again. And no one will think there's any reason to believe that anything will change.

But of course we know that the flood did come, just as Noah said it would. And it came just as suddenly as lightning flashes across the sky (verse 27). It came just as unexpectedly as a thief breaking into a house (verse 43). It came just as undeniably, just as unmistakably as a fig tree budding in the spring (verse 32). And as Jesus says in verse 39, the flood took them all away, everyone who had scoffed at the notion of God's coming judgment, everyone who just assumed that things would bump along as they always had. As Peter says, the world that existed perished, flooded by water – just as it will be consumed by fire on the day of Christ's return.

And because Jesus' coming will be just as sudden, just as unexpected, and just as unmistakable as the Flood in the days of Noah, that's all the more reason that we need to learn what Jesus is trying to teach us in this passage. For remember, at the beginning of this chapter the disciples asked Jesus two questions: what would be the signs of His coming, and when would it take place.

Now, last week we studied Jesus' answer to their first question. He said, "See to it that no one misleads or deceives you." Trying to correct their expectations of comfort and ease and influence, Jesus reminded them that the true signs of His coming would be the persecution of the Church and, through that suffering, the witness that they would bear to all the nations, the witness that Christ came not to push people around, but to suffer and die for all who trust in Him.

Okay, so what is the answer to the disciples' second question? What lesson does Jesus want us to learn about the timing of His coming and the end of the age? Look at verse 42: "Watch therefore – be on the alert." Precisely because we can't possibly figure out when He is coming, precisely because all the signs of His coming have been fulfilled over and over again throughout history, precisely because His coming will be just as sudden, just as unexpected, and just as unmistakable as the coming of the Great Flood, we must always be ready.

So, what should we do to get ready? We'll look at that question in more detail next week. But for now, we simply need to understand how important it is to watch for His coming, to be on high alert, just as if we knew someone was planning to break into our house. For at the very least, being ready for His coming means living each day as if it very well might be not only our last day to live, but the last day anyone gets a chance to live.

For why did Peter tell us that the Father keeps on waiting to send Jesus back to earth? It's not because He is somehow slack about keeping His promises. No, it's because He is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). In other words, the reason Jesus hasn't come back yet is because there are still people who are alive or people who have yet to be born who haven't come to faith in Him.

And so, just as the sign of our suffering bears witness to the love of Christ, our steadfastness in watching for His coming bears witness to the truth of His promises – promises not only to forgive us of our sins, but promises to come again and take all who trust in Him to be with Him forever. And we can be sure of those promises – for even though heaven and earth will be purged by fire at His coming, Jesus assures us that His words will never pass away.

So yes, let's make sure that we are bearing true witness to Christ each and every day. Let's abandon our unrealistic expectations of this world, and keep our hopes focused instead on the promise of greater and more permanent blessings of the world to come. For the One Who is coming has promised to gather His chosen ones from the four winds, from all over the world. And when He comes with power and great glory, He has promised to set all things right and make all things new.

So, yes, the signs of His coming are all around us. The fig tree has already put forth its leaves, so the fruit can't be far behind. So while we wait, let us live every day as if it is our last. Let's draw near to Christ in faith. And as we long for His coming, let us be on the alert.