

## Sermon by Leonard VanderZee: "Steady and Ready" from Isaiah 2 and Matthew 24

There are basically two kinds of shoppers. There are those who shop with the goal of a particular purchase in mind, and those for whom the shopping itself is the goal. For the first group shopping goes something like this: You notice that the elastic on your underpants is getting fairly loose, so you head over to Penney's to get some new underwear. It's like replacing worn-out equipment. You just go and do it in as little time and with as little fuss as possible. (Some would say this group is mostly men, but if you follow some men into Home Depot you'll realize that's too simplistic.)

For the other kind of shopper, it's a completely different sort of experience. She (I'll go with the stereotype here since it's what I know personally) announces to her husband that she needs a new pair of shoes, would you like to come along. Sure, he thinks, "How much time can it take to find a pair of shoes." But they get to the mall and she heads toward Crate and Barrel. "But love, I don't think that store has any shoes" "Oh, I know that, but I love that store, it has so many neat things." So he dutifully and lovingly follows along. She is looking at coffee mugs. She loves the shapes and sizes. "Don't you love this mug?" she asks. He says, "Yes, but I don't think it's very comfortable to walk in." She doesn't think this is very funny. From the mugs it's on to the serving dishes, and water goblets. As this goes on she seems to be gaining energy, while he feels like he's ready to become a puddle on the floor. Suddenly he realizes what this is all about. This is not about shoes. This is not a goal-oriented activity!

Without saying that one way of shopping is best, life sometimes seems like that the latter. There's no real goal. It's not headed anywhere in particular. One year rolls into the next. One Christmas blends into another. We pack up and move from one house to another, but then we may move again in a few years. We're sort of aimlessly wandering through the mall of the cosmos.

Maybe that's why the lectionary passages for the first Sunday of Advent shock us into realizing again that there's a goal. The universe is not a shopping mall. God is steering history toward his purposes. The whole church declares it in the creed. "I believe that he will come again to judge the living and the dead."

The first Sunday of Advent always calls the church to take a long hard look at the end. This is somewhat annoying for those who merely think of Advent as a segue to Christmas. What does all this stuff about Jesus' return and warnings about the last days have to do with Christmas? Let's just sing some carols.

But Christ's first and second comings belong precisely together. If you can believe what Augustine calls the "absurdity" of God coming to us as a baby in a stable, then it's not much of a reach to anticipate his second coming. Christ's coming in glory cannot be any harder to believe than his cutting himself down to human size and snuggling into Mary's womb.

And one coming of God demands another. If Christmas is about God's becoming a helpless child, and about the hopes and fears of all the years meeting in Bethlehem, then

he has to come again. The promise of the first advent insists on a second. Clearly, God is not finished yet. The nations have not beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. The candles of Christmas are blown out by the atrocities of Darfur and the violence of Iraq without the hope of that great shout of victory and reign of peace when Christ returns.

So, we light the Advent candles again with that strange longing for something we cannot see and barely imagine, for something we certainly cannot do for ourselves.

In these verses from Matthew 24 Jesus tells us how to live in the light of the end. It seems to me he emphasizes two attitudes we need today, to be steady, and to be ready.

First. Jesus calls us to be steady. There's a built in tension in this chapter. On the one hand Jesus talks earlier in the chapter of the signs of the end, "nation will rise up against nation, you will hear of wars and rumors of wars, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places..." These are often called the "signs of the times." These "signs" get people looking up obscure passages in Ezekiel and Daniel and Revelation and hauling out their charts that purport to prove that Jesus will return soon. With the Middle East in turmoil, and Iraq in the balance, and "Christian" America astride the world, it's a boom market for eschatological speculation. Phil Jenkins, co-author of the "Left Behind" books, was quoted recently claiming his certainty that the "rapture" will come in his lifetime. Four hundred years ago, with the Turks at the doors of Europe, Martin Luther said the same thing.

On the other hand, here and elsewhere Jesus explicitly says, "but that day or hour no one knows, not even the Son..." Which leaves us with only this: It could be today; it could be in another thousand years. Whatever happens in human history, one event remains, and this one is completely unpredictable, the coming of Jesus Christ in glory at the end of time.

This whole passage is predicated on surprise. In Noah's day they went on with life. Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Then boom, the thunder claps and the rain falls. And later, people are working in the field or at home. But suddenly, one is taken, and the other is left. (What with the best-selling "Left Behind novels, I have to explain that Jesus is not talking here about the so called "pre-tribulation rapture," which is the official interpretation of these books. They imagine a spectacle of cars hurtling down the highway without drivers and pilot-less planes falling from the skies. The saints are carried off to heaven while the rest of the people have to go through the terrible events of the end-time. There's no evidence in scripture that God's people will escape any of the world's tribulation. The "rapture" Jesus is talking about is the first great public act of his return, when those who love him, living and dead, will, as Paul says, "meet him in the skies" to usher him back to earth in glory and triumph.)

The fact that we cannot know the day or the hour means that we do not live as speculators who guess about the future. It's not that the Bible gives us some secret code we need to crack to discover when the end will be. What Christ gives us is a promise that he will return, and it's this personal promise that orients our lives to the future.

The point is this, don't get all carried away with trying to predict this event. It will come as a thief in the night, when you least expect it. You will be surprised, so draw the proper consequences from that fact. Jesus calls us to be steady as we wait for the fulfillment of his promise.

But Jesus also warns us to be ready.

Think again about Jesus' example of the time of Noah. It's interesting that Jesus emphasizes the normality of it all. Wining and dining, marrying and being given in marriage. It's all so normal. There will be gourmet meals, parties, people falling in love and getting married and having children right up to the cataclysmic moment of Christ's coming. And Jesus doesn't even indict the people of Noah's day for beings particularly evil. They aren't doing any terrible things in this parable. It's not their wedding parties that's the problem, it's their nonchalance about God's impending judgment.

Jesus is calling his people to look beneath the facade of normalcy, to the deep realities of life in these last days. Just as Noah was building his Ark for the flood, so we should be building arks of faith and works of mercy in the light of Christ's return. We can so immerse ourselves in the everyday that we don't even think about the Last Day. We can so pursue the "good" life that we neglect eternal life.

Remember the song by Carly Simon that repeated the refrain, "I haven't got time for the pain." If all this life means is to cram all we can in between the two dates of our tombstone, then we don't have time for the pain. We don't have time for the handicapped, for the sick, the hungry. We don't have time for that difficult marriage, the patient faithful works of mercy. We don't have time for some far-off Kingdom somewhere; we've only got time for ourselves.

To be ready people means that we need to live our lives in the light of this great overwhelming expectation of Christ's coming. The question isn't just what we happen to be doing at the moment of Christ's return. It's what our lives are dedicated to.

It's not easy. A bumper sticker reads. "Jesus is coming soon. Look busy!" Beverly Gaventa says that it's one thing to be busy if the Lord is really coming tomorrow. But when tomorrow is just more of today, and all our labors of love seem poured into a bottomless pit of human suffering, indifference, and cynicism, then it's hard to march out the front door every day to be Christ's disciples. Yet, even now, as we journey along, we never know when we may encounter the living Christ waiting for us around the next bend, in the next person we meet. This is but an anticipation of the great climax of all human history and longing, when the world, seemingly spinning along in ceaseless tedium, will find itself confronted with the Lord of history.

Fredrick Dale Brunner points out that in Jesus' example of the end, the "rapture" does not take special people in special places. In both verses, people are at their ordinary work in the fields and at the threshing floor. This fact honors our secular vocations and Christians being faithful in them. So, taking seriously the Lord's coming does not mean taking this world or our work any less seriously.

There is a kind of world-hating sentiment that can come with all the end-time frenzy. Several years ago Jerry Falwell reflected this kind of end-times fatalism when a TV commentator asked him if he was concerned about the environment. He said, in effect, that he had no concern about the environment because Jesus is coming back, and therefore we had better use it before we lose it. There is something very strange about eagerly looking for God to destroy the creation because we're going to heaven anyway. That cuts the heart out of Christ's first coming. God sent his Son to this world because He loves the creation. The goal of Christ's saving death and resurrection is not to destroy the creation but to renew it. Luther was once asked what he would like to be doing when the Lord returns. "Planting peach trees," was his wonderful, and biblically correct response.

Being ready is not to be constantly scanning the sky, or jumping out of your skin with every loud noise, or trying to penetrate the mysteries of the book of Revelation. It's living for the Lord in faithfulness and love every day. It's nurturing ourselves and our children in faith. It's loving and helping your neighbor in need. It's sharing the gospel. It's using your skills and talents not for yourself and your own enrichment, but for God and for his Kingdom.

Remember, what we do here and now is intensely important for eternity. In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson writes, "In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets." What a bracing thought! Our present struggle to follow Jesus, our courageous faith, our works and our witness in this age, become the celebrated lore of the age to come.

When I was 18 I had too much I wanted to experience in this world to get too excited about the Lord's return. That's perfectly natural. However, I find that the older I get, the more I anticipate Christ's return. In this disordered world there's only true hope, only one gift that inspires real anticipation. James Nestingen puts it this way, "Christ is coming, and when he gets here it is the graves that will suffer the deepest robbery, the law that will be deprived of its claims, and the evil one who will stand empty-handed." Life isn't just wandering through the mall of history. There's a goal to it all. Just like God drew a line through history in the birth, death and resurrection of his son, a line that marks the division we call B. C. and A. D., God will draw another line that will mark the end of this age and the advent of the age to come. The end is Christ coming in glory, the creation transfigured, and shalom restored. Isaiah sings of it in his yearning prophecy, "In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains...and the nations shall stream to it." (Is. 2:2) Tears will be wiped away, and the joyful shout of a renewed creation will erupt to the glory of God. "Therefore you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Matt: 24:44) Maranatha: Come. Lord Jesus, come quickly.