

Begin the Between

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 24:36-44

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Matthew 24:36-44

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.



“Don’t be afraid of the space between your dreams and reality. If you can dream it, you can make it so.”

I didn’t know who Belva Davis was when I came across this quote of hers online while searching for Advent themes for this year. I found out that Ms. Davis is a broadcast journalist in San Francisco who has been a news anchor with CBS, NBC, and PBS and she now hosts a highly respected political affairs program on KQED-TV San Francisco, the most watched public TV station in the United States.

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Her online blog says about her:

Belva Davis is a history maker, an award-winning journalist, a pioneering feminist, a dedicated community servant, a wife and mother, and a gifted storyteller. As a popular anchorwoman, Davis has landed in the middle of some of the biggest news events of recent history. From her base in San Francisco, she has traveled the world reporting on politics, terrorism, racial and gender issues and the role of art and culture in increasing human understanding.

It sounds to me like she has had dreams and she has made them come to reality in her life. I still don’t know much about her but my guess is that she is not afraid of whatever it is between those dreams and reality and that she truly lives that quote to it’s fullest.

“Don’t be afraid of the space between your dreams and reality. If you can dream it, you can make it so.”

This morning we begin a between-time as a church community. We are now in Advent when we are called to wait ... to wait and hope. It’s what the prophets call us to – it’s Isaiah’s message to us this morning:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house **shall be** established as the highest of the mountains, and **shall be** raised above the hills; all the nations **shall** stream to it. ³Many peoples **shall** come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion **shall go forth** instruction, and the

word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He **shall judge** between the nations, and **shall arbitrate** for many peoples; they **shall** beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation **shall not** lift up sword against nation, neither **shall** they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:2-5)

We're not quite there yet are we? Isaiah talks to us in the future tense. This is what will come – this is what we are looking for – this is what the Messiah, if he's talking about the coming of the Messiah, will bring to this world. But we know for sure that we're not quite there yet.

We're not at the point where we're ready to beat our swords or missiles into plows are we? We're not giving up our spears or handguns in exchange for pruning hooks are we? And when we're in the middle of two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and military showdowns in Korea and Iran it's pretty hard to argue that we're exhibiting a willingness to lay down our empire's swords or aircraft carriers.

We're not quite there yet. We who believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One who the prophets were pointing toward can't really make a rational argument that we have accomplished what it is his message and life brought to this world. So it seems to me pretty obvious that we haven't accomplished what Jesus calls us to so we must still be in the between somewhere.

Which means it's a good thing we continue to include Advent on our church calendar year after year. We need it there until we get the message – until we live the message – until we understand what it is the message of Jesus call us to.

Karl Barth was a Swiss Reformed systematic theologian considered by most to be one of the most important Christian thinkers of the 20th Century. Barth wrote often of the fact that the church exists “between the times” – that we, as followers of Jesus live “between the times.” Jesus, according to Barth, gives us space and time to actively share in the message that he has brought to us, the “harvest which follows from the sowing of reconciliation.” Jesus wants us to join him as “independently active and free subjects.” That's the between time that we find ourselves in. Right here, right now.

Not just Advent leading to Christmas—not just the four weeks that lead up to our most precious and most expensive holiday of the year. That's not the between that's going on here.

“Don't be afraid of the space between.”

Christians have long debated when and how the day of judgment will come. Some argue that there is a timeline of events that they can deduce from scripture – including this morning's Matthew passage and other apocalyptic texts – a timeline of events which is already underway. From this group comes Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth* and Tim Lahaye's and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* fiction. There is a day of rapture, argues this line of Christian argument, and at that day some will be lifted to the Lord in their physical bodies while reprobates are left behind to suffer.

A second line of thinking among some Christians is that the day of judgment comes not at the end of human history but rather at the death of each individual when that person is finally in the presence of God and has to answer for one's life decisions and actions.

A third argument is that Jesus' message in Matthew's Gospel here is more symbolic and that it's useless to speculate about when and how the day of judgment will come but rather that we are confronted with God's radical claims on us here and now and that

every moment of every day I need to be asking myself “Am I living in the way of Christ?”

Where do you fit in among those arguments? Some combine bits and pieces of each or have developed variations on similar themes. Where do you fit? If we are indeed living in a time after the first coming of the Messiah and before the return of the Messiah, then we are in the between. Karl Barth’s between. What are you doing in the between?

This piece of apocalyptic scripture which Matthew puts into Jesus’ mouth here is fascinating. No one knows – so why do we debate it? The angels don’t know. Jesus doesn’t know. Only God knows.

As far as I read, according to this scripture, it really doesn’t matter what we do in this between time. During the days of Noah, people ate and drank, married and lived their lives while Noah built the ark. They didn’t know what was coming, Noah didn’t know what was coming, only God knew. And there wasn’t anything anyone could have done to stop the cataclysm that was coming.

When the Messiah returns two of us might be working in the field and “one will be taken and one will be left.” Nothing you can do about it. When the Messiah returns two of us might be grinding meal together and “one will be taken and one will be left.” Nothing any one of us can do about it. All we have to do is keep awake and know that it’s coming.

A friend in seminary was raised in the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal church which accepts a pretty literal reading of scripture like this. He said it was drilled in their heads as teenagers: “You never know the hour or day. So you don’t want to be caught with your girlfriend in the back seat of the car when the end comes!”

We are in the between. Advent begins today. We have 26 days to get ready for Christmas Day. There are lots of things to do in this between time. We have to shop and bake cookies and send cards, we have to shop and decorate and visit friends, we have to shop and plan parties and listen to Christmas music, we have to shop and shop and ... well you get the picture. You know what the next 26 days look like on your calendars.

But that’s not really getting ready is it? That’s not really the between that the season of Advent is supposed to remind us about. We begin today not 26 days of shopping but we begin a time of remembering the past – the birth of Jesus – and looking forward into the future – the return of the Messiah. It’s a part of the wait that begins the between today.

And really, if we read and focus *only* on this piece of Matthew’s Gospel and what Jesus says here, we’ve got nothing to do in the between times – in the here and now. It doesn’t matter what we do if we read only this piece of scripture. But therein lays a clue. We don’t read only this piece of scripture. We read “the rest of the story,” don’t we?

Back to Karl Barth for a minute. When he talks about the “between the times” he also tells us that “the time between the times is precisely [Jesus’] gracious decision to give us an opportunity to join him on his way.” (John L Drury in *Jesus Christ is on His Way: Transitioning from Christ to Us without Eclipsing the Spirit In Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics IV/3 §69.4*) There it is. If we pay attention to all of the other things that Jesus teaches, then we have lots to do in the between.

We have to figure out how to love one another. We have to figure out how to be peacemakers. We have to feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner. We have to reconcile with our enemies. We have to pay attention to the birds of the air and the fish in the sea. We have to reach out to those who the world rejects – whoever they are. We have to bind the

wounds of the wounded. We have to bring God's Good News to the world. We have to give our money and our time and our committed lives to serve God. We have to love ourselves, our neighbors, our enemies, our God. None of those are any small task.

And guess what? None of those will have any impact whatsoever on when or how the Messiah will return. And none of those actions will make any difference whether you or I go or stay at that hour. When the Messiah returns two of us might be working in the field and "one will be taken and one will be left." Nothing you can do about it. Nothing.

But what the totality of Jesus message compels us to do is to act on the *full* message. Not because it gets us one step closer to being saved or an inch closer to being welcomed into God's presence or one minute closer to earning God's mercy at the judgment. The Jesus message compels us to act in those ways simply because if we truly understand what he's talking about we have no choice but to act on that message of love and justice and compassion and reconciliation. If we have truly grasped the full message of Jesus, we have no choice but to live out that way with our full lives.

"To live between the time is, above all," one commentator writes, "to trust and hope that God has begun, and will continue, to transform us more and more into the stature of Christ, in whom God's mercy and loving-kindness becomes manifest. Advent calls us into a continuing history of relationship with the Christ who meets us whichever way we turn." (John P. Burgess, *Feasting the Word*)

"Don't be afraid of the space between ..." The space between your dreams and reality like Belva Davis says. And "don't be afraid of the space between" the birth of the Messiah the first time and the return of the Messiah whenever that comes. "Don't be afraid of the space between" – live out the message of Jesus in the here and now – in the between that begins today.

Amen.