

*How Does It End?*

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

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## Matthew 24:36-44

<sup>36</sup>“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup>For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>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. <sup>44</sup>Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.



How does it all end? That’s where we start Advent. How does it all end?

It seems like weird place to be in Advent – an odd question at the beginning of this season before Christmas. We’re just getting started aren’t we? Getting started with a new church year – Advent starts each church year; different than the calendar year. We’re getting started preparing for another Christmas celebration which begins just a few weeks from now. Getting started shopping for Christmas gifts, planning for guests, thinking about where and how we’ll spend Christmas this year.

We’re just getting started. But the question on Matthew’s and Luke’s minds is: “How does it all end?” It was the question that most of the early Christians had and it was the core question that the Gospels are trying to answer. The Christians heard Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel saying that no one could know when the end

was coming, that the Son of Man would surely return and that we should all be awake and ready for the end, but who knows when that would happen. Like a thief in the night the Human Being comes at an unexpected hour. “Wait, watch, be ready,” they heard Matthew’s Jesus say, “it can happen at any time.”

Two men are minding their own business, working in the field. One will be taken to be with the faithful, the other will be left behind. Two women grinding grain, chatting about their successful children, one will be taken to be with God when the end comes, the other will not.

It sounds so ominous, doesn’t it? *The Left Behind* series of books that I mentioned last week is a totally fictional account of the end of the world with absolutely no basis in scripture, yet they have struck a sensitive nerve in the American psyche. How does it all end? They’ve created novel stories that offer answers to that question for a population that wants an answer, even if it’s fictionalized.

A survey on their Website asks the question, “Are you ready for Jesus to return?” More than 50 percent of respondents said "I'm anxiously expecting his return." Nearly 3 in 10 either had unfinished business or didn't want to end their earthly good times just yet when they said "I hope he comes in my lifetime, but not yet." Two in 10 said either "I need to get ready" or "I'm afraid I'll be left behind." Another group, about 3 in 100, said "I know I'll be left behind, but I don't know what to do."

The question is so much on our minds that an urban myth arose suggesting that some on New Years Eve 1999, airlines scheduled non-Christian pilots along with Christian pilots in case the Biblical "rapture" took place and the Christian pilot suddenly disappeared. How does it all end? Inquiring minds want to know.

Hugo Zachini, was a quiet and well mannered man – he was also "The Human Cannonball." Known as "The Great Zachini," Hugo performed for years at Coney Island before joining with the Flying Wallendas on the carnival and circus circuit. The routine was the same: three times a day, he'd slide into a specially designed, large shining silver cannon, have his assistant (his son) light a large fuse and, with a large boom and billow of smoke, have himself launched some 300 feet through the air into a specially designed net. News people and fans would always ask him questions about the thrill of being vaulted from the mouth of a cannon and careening through the air. Toward the end of his career, one newswoman reflected on how much courage it must take to fly through the air. The Great Zachini, with a grin, replied that, for him, flying through the air was not a frightening thing - that he actually enjoyed it. The reporter asked, "So, being shot out of a cannon isn't difficult?" "No," Zachini shot back, "flying out of a cannon isn't hard. Landing in that tiny net - now that's the hard part."

The Great Zachini knew how he wanted it all to end – in the soft embrace of a safety net. He knew what the end was about – and he knew getting to the end was the hard part of the routine. I know that in my life, I always hope that the safety net is going to be there at the end of any experience that I get blasted into. When I climb into the barrel of a cannon and let someone light the fuse, I expect that there will be a nice, comfortable net at the end of the vault. Getting into the cannon is easy; landing in one piece is the difficult part.

There's been more than one moment in my life where I've felt like I've been launched into the air by a big cannon. There have been exciting, thrilling, adrenalin pumping, heart pounding moments in my life. Moments when it seems like the very ground has flown out from under me and, while the rush is exhilarating, I find myself feeling virtually helpless, in unfamiliar territory, and invigorated all at the same time. You know those moments in your own life: like a first day at school when you're excited about the

newness of it all but also anxious about the uncertainty of it all; your first days on a new job you've worked hard for but find yourself feeling like you haven't a clue as to what you're doing. Maybe you've been in love, "swept off your feet," feeling propelled through the air. But at the same time we have all known moments when we were aware a relationship has past its high point and is headed downward toward a crash into the ground.

Like The Great Zachini we work hard to find something that will keep us from smacking disastrously into the fast approaching ground. Grace catches us before it's all over and we crash.

Have you ever known someone who is heading obviously and obliviously into a relationship which is doomed – with a woman who is beyond demanding or with a man who is abusive? You watch from the outside and you know how it's going to end – crash and burn. You can look down the line and see that there is no net in sight for your friend. You try to persuade your friend about the heartbreaking disaster awaiting, but he or she shrugs it off and goes careening by having been blissfully shot from that cannon. No safety net. Your friend is going to crash and you can't stop it from happening.

I've know people like that. I've had friends like that. I've been one of those people, in fact. No net; a headfirst circus act. How does it end? We can guess for our friend. But we don't usually listen to those who know the answer for us. And we almost never know how it ends for ourselves.

Jesus' disciples were faced with the same questions. They were asking where the safety net was for them. Basic human questions – how's this going to end and how's it affect me? "No one knows," says Jesus, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Human Being, nor God." No one knows? Imagine the stunned disciples. "We assumed you would know, Teacher. You have the direct line to God, don't you? Can't you just ask for some clarification here? It sure would help us out a little. How's it all going to end and how's it affect me?"

In a sermon I heard one year, renowned preaching professor Tom Long tells of visiting his father and making a visit to the small church graveyard where Long's mother had been recently buried. There, Long was a bit un-nerved to find that a two person headstone had been installed. It held not only information about his late mother, but also his father's full name and birth date. Sensing Tom's anxiety, his father smiled and said "I'll let you fill in the rest."

But what grabbed Tom Long's attention about his parents' gravestone was what was underneath the names and numbers – a reference to Romans 8. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Carved on the headstone, Long recalls, was that phrase which pointed to the promise – what is and was, for his parents, the "final word."

The promise of Romans 8 was their safety net, which simply affirmed that whatever was at the end of this life, it was their faith in the love of a merciful and compassionate Creator, whose gift of eternal life they understood to be in and through Jesus, which caught them at the conclusion of their cannon-propelled trajectory through life.

"There will be wars," Jesus says earlier in this 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel, but that's not the end. "There will be conflict," says Jesus, but that's not how it ends. "Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs." Wars, rumors of wars, conflict, nations against nations, Messianic claims. This is not how it all ends. "You do not know on what day your Lord is coming," wake up, be ready, for the unexpected hour. Wake up!

Luke has John the Baptist saying it a little differently. 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. <sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (Luke 3: 4b-6)

Even in the midst of wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, conflicts, nations against nations; even in the midst of all the ugly of the world, we can find beauty in God's promises revealed to us by Jesus.

You see we followers of Jesus have a secret – we are supposed to know better than to ask how it all ends. Or better yet, we are supposed to know that we can't possibly know how it all ends. All we can know is that this isn't how it ends – when the world is in the shape it's in. All we know is that we need to get ready, and to get ready we need to wake up, and once we wake up we'll know to do something about the world along the journey of so many miles.

Matthew wants us to know a few things about Jesus and the end. He wants us to know that there is an end – and it's not what we expect. "The last will be first and the first will be last," Jesus continually reminds us – at least three different times he makes the point. The end is the Omega – "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last," says Jesus in the Revelation to John. Jesus is not only at the beginning of all, he is the end of all. The message of Jesus is that how we live with each other today depends on how we view the end – the Beatitudes – "blessed are the peacemakers for they will be children of God." We know the ending – followers of Jesus want to be peacemakers now because we know that in the end the peacemakers, not the war-makers will be children of God.

And Matthew wants us to understand that into the midst of the mundane comes a glimpse of the end times – "For as in the days of Noah ... they were eating and drinking and marrying" – those words in the original Greek rhymed. So the sentence sounded like

“for as in the days when things were yada-da-dadada, yada-da-dadada, yada-da-dadada” the end came – BAM – unexpectedly with the flood. So even now, when things seem mundane and ordinary – yada-da-dadada, yada-da-dadada, yada-da-dadada – the end can come – BAM – when no one is paying attention. A glimpse of the end in the middle of the mundane.

How we are during the now is dependent upon how we understand the end, how we are preparing for the end, how we are anticipating the end. If we know that this is not the end – that the end comes only in God’s time, that the end is not something to be anxious about that the end requires only that we wait, watch and prepare, then we live a full life now serving God in all that we do, resting in the grace that God promises.

In Tim Burton's wonderful movie *Big Fish*, Albert Finney and Ewan McGregor play, respectively, the older and younger Edward Bloom, a man known for taking everyday events in his life and making them “elaborate.” One episode from the film describes a childhood adventure Edward makes with several friends as they are about 10 or so. Local legend has it that a witch lives in a rundown house in their Alabama town and that if you look into her glass eye you’ll see your own death. On a dare, Edward knocks on the door of the creepy house and coaxes the woman to meet his friends. The old woman, who should be recognized as the “Wisdom” of God in biblical literary symbolism, lets the boys look into her death-telling eye. The two friends run away in horror having seen their tragic end.

Bloom, however, calmly requests a look and without hesitation takes a glance at his end. With a smile, the old woman obliges him, raising the eye patch for his look. Edward stares intently and then with curiosity-raised eyebrows calmly replies, "Oh, so that's how it ends..." He then calmly heads back home.

Throughout the rest of the film, Edward Bloom lives his life with confidence knowing that “this is not how it ends.” Whenever he encounters something that others might think of as

fatal, he rebuffs them – “this is not how it ends.” He knows how it ends – or at least he has faith enough to not be worried about how it ends – so he can live his life with confidence and assurance and perseverance.

Can we? That’s the Advent invitation. “This is not the end,” the Gospel writers want us to know, “And you, Christians, know that. You know the end is not something that you can anticipate. This is not the end because you know the end is only in God’s time.”

Live your life to the fullest. Respond to the Jesus message as if the end is today and tomorrow and the day after. Let the Jesus message, the promise, be your safety net as you propel through life like the Human Cannonball being shot from a cannon. Live knowing that each day the world ends and begins all over again. Live without fear or anxiety or worry. Keep awake, be ready, live free without fear.

God is the first and the last, the beginning and at the end. Wake up! Let us continue our journey to Bethlehem ...and beyond.

Amen.