

Are You Ready?
Sermon on November 26, 2017
At Kona UMC
Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31-46
By Jim Monk

Well, here we are – we've completed the liturgical year of 2017. Next week starts a brand new Christian year with its very first season – Advent. Why, you've only got 29 shopping days before Christmas! Are you ready? Do you have your gifts all planned and wrapped? Do we have our church plans for the new year all laid out? It will be an exciting time!

Let's take a moment to think about this thing called the liturgical year. Just like our calendar year it rolls around and around, season after season. We have names for our calendar years – like 2000 or 2017 – and the liturgical year uses that same numbering.

Our liturgical year – just like our calendar year – is divided into seasons, or periods. As I said just a moment ago, next week starts the first period of the liturgical year – Advent. It's our time not only for the preparation of the celebration of Jesus' birth but also for his expected coming back at the end of time.

Advent doesn't last too long – only until right before our Christmas Eve service on December 24th. Then we move into Christmas Time with all its wonders and celebrations. And it's not just Christmas. We also have Epiphany, which is the time when the Wise Men, representing all Gentiles, meet Jesus. And Christmas Time traditionally ends forty days after Christmas, at the time when Mary presented the infant Jesus for baptism. Other Christian churches have other celebrations during this time as well.

From Christmas Time we move into the first of two Ordinary Times of the church year. These weeks fill up the liturgical year and the name in Latin, **Tempus per annum**, translates as *time during the year*.

The next major period in the Christian year is Lent. Most people know about Lent since it is a time for reflection, reform and repentance after the big celebrations of Mardi Gras around the world. The liturgical year then moves immediately into the Easter period which runs for seven weeks until

Pentecost. From there we go into the second Ordinary Time which runs from Pentecost until this week. And we are right back where we started.

For a lot of Christian churches the whole liturgical year is tied together by the use of a lectionary. This listing lays out the Bible readings for every week, and for some churches every day, of the year along with suggestions as to colors for decoration and hymns to be sung. The Roman Catholic Church held its Second Vatican Council in 1969 and reformed the liturgy it had been using for centuries. It took a few years, but in 1994 most Protestant churches adopted the Catholic reforms and produced a three year common lectionary cycle that reads essentially all of the Bible in a three year period. Today, for example, marks the end of Lectionary A and next week we will start on Lectionary B for the next liturgical year. So the Bible reading we are using today, Matthew 25: 31-46, was set for us back in 1994! So let's think about it.

Pause

In a village far from here and a long ago, there was a cobbler by the name of Conrad. Though poor and without any family, the kindly old man always had a warm and friendly word for everyone. Many folks took lighter hearts away from his hut, along with their carefully mended shoes.

On one particular Christmas morning, some neighbors, thinking how lonely Conrad must feel without any family, decided to pay him a visit. They found him sweeping away the snow in front of his home, and to their surprise his face was radiant and happy as he greeted them.

As they entered his house, they gazed in amazement. Instead of a dreary room, they saw a place made festive with holly and evergreen, with Christmas decorations brightening the walls. And the table was set for two. Obviously, Conrad was expecting a guest. "Who is coming to visit you?" they asked in surprise. Conrad replied, "Last night Jesus appeared to me in a dream. He told me I wouldn't be alone on Christmas Day, for He himself was coming to be my guest. That is why I have prepared so joyfully. I'm all ready now. I am waiting for him to come.

After the neighbors left, Conrad sat by the window, quietly watching and waiting for the Lord to come. While he watched, a beggar passed his

window, almost frozen in the harsh winter winds. Conrad called him in. He offered the beggar the warmth of his home and gave him some shoes for his frozen feet.

Soon after the beggar left, an old woman hobbled by, carrying on her back a heavy load of firewood. Conrad ran out, lifted the load from her back, and helped her into his home. There he gave her some food and a warm seat by the fireplace. After she had rested a while he helped her on her way.

Conrad again sat by the window to watch for his Lord. Then he heard a child sobbing. Opening his front door, he found a little girl wandering lost and frightened in the snow. Some warm milk and soothing words stilled the frightened cries, and soon afterward Conrad restored the lost child to her mother's arms. Conrad returned to his vigil. But now the sun was sinking, and the wintry Christmas day was coming to an end.

Where was his promised guest? Anxious and weary and somewhat disappointed, Conrad dropped to his knees and prayed, "Oh, Lord, where were you? I waited and watched for you all day. Why didn't you come?"

Out of the silence came a calm voice: "Oh, Conrad, my Conrad, don't be dismayed. This very day, three times I came to your door. Three times my shadow crossed your floor. I was the beggar with frozen feet. I was the woman you fed. I was the little girl who was lost."

Our Scripture reading today said the same thing: "Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry. . . thirsty. . . a stranger. . . naked. . . sick. . . in prison and you came to me. As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"

Are you ready in our new church year to help those less fortunate than you: the sick, the hungry, the prisoner?

Or are you too busy getting those Christmas presents ready, preparing another fabulous meal like we probably all enjoyed just a few days ago, making ready for some great trip you're going to take – just too busy with your own things to help others?

Our Scripture lesson goes on to tell of those who didn't help: "Depart from me you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." The moral here? We all need to look to our actions and how we relate to others. Not only that but we should be thinking about it now and not putting it off until tomorrow!

Just think of the big farmer in Luke 12 who says to himself after an especially bountiful year "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? [Hmmm,] I will do this: I will pull down my old barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry."

But it wasn't to be! He was so focused on himself that he forgot to look beyond himself and it got to be too late. God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." The moment of reckoning may come at any time.

Matthew 24:36 tells us: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." Even though Jesus told some of his disciples that the kingdom would come before all of them died, he then warned them that no one really knows when the Second Coming will occur, except God – and he's not talking!

And many people have thought various years might be that very special year: the Mayan civilization's calendar ended on December 21st, 2012. Some said it would be "the end", others said it would be a "major transition" – to something different. Others said that an alignment of the axis of the Milky Way, our solar system, our planet and the other planets around us would cause gravitational fluctuations serious enough to trigger earthquakes and tsunamis and our lives might be changed in dramatic ways. The Mayan calendar was silent on what would happen when its end came. And nothing did. That day passed like every other one – from sunrise to sunset and on to the next day.

So watch out for those false prophets that say they can tell when the end is coming. They are wrong – they can't. Go all the way back to 1978 and think about when James Warren Jones convinced a whole lot of people to follow him from the US to Guyana to found a commune away from capitalistic

America – it became known as Jonestown. They were preparing for the End. Before it was over, they counted 912 people who had died in that strange location because of some false teachings.

And again in Matthew Jesus tells us about the false prophets in Chapter 24: “Then if any one says to you, ‘Lo, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand.”

Now, Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew are loaded with forecasts like the great tribulation and the coming of the Son of Man and also many parables: of the fig tree, watchfulness, faithful and unfaithful servants, the ten virgins, the use and misuse of money and our reading of today about the final judgment. These two chapters are relating what happened at the end of Jesus’ ministry. The rest of the gospel takes us on to Jerusalem and the final acts of our Lord on earth. Almost all the parables in Matthew are about being prepared and watching out for the coming. But several times Jesus is quoted as telling people that the time of the coming is unknown, even to Him.

Several times each week I get ready and drive my almost hour long trip to town for shopping, meetings, to work at the church and to socialize. Often I think about my house, and myself, and ponder if both are ready for me not to show up again. With the wild driving that is often seen on our highways, it seems reasonable to me to be prepared for not coming back home someday. Of course, if The Second Coming pops out one day, everything else will be irrelevant. But in the meantime, I try to be prepared.

Are you ready? Do you order your life so you are prepared for what might come? Is some visitor going to find you ready to welcome them? And, if I were a lawyer, I’d say – do you have your will written, but I’m not, so I won’t.

But getting back to the Bible, Matthew is not the only book where we find stories told by Jesus about preparing for The End. In Luke, chapter 12 has the story of the rich farmer. A bit later there is another call to be ready in verse 35 – “Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.”

In the Revelations to John that make up the final book of our Bible, we can find a wonderful description of what it will be like when the Second Coming has occurred. John talks about what he has seen in his visions. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.’”

It’s going to be a great place and a great time – for those of us who are ready. And getting ready is really simple: believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, yield your soul into His hands, follow his teachings to love others as yourself. Be ready. And what a joy it will be!

Are you ready?

Amen.