

# Hear the good news

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.*

*Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour (Matthew 24:36-44).*

Welcome to Advent.

This is the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Advent this year. This warning from Jesus comes after his words about the end of the world. The apocalypse is upon us, there will be tribulation and the world will see the day of God's vengeance on human sin. How perky. This doesn't quite fit with Christmas decorations, lovely carols and the relentless merriness that has been in stores, in advertisements and in the media since Labor Day.

And what about our Lord's admonition to be awake, be aware, be ever-vigilant? We won't know the hour. We might be left behind. At the very least it's exhausting to be on watch all day every day.

How is this passage from Matthew good news and how is it good news at this time of year? How does this text help us to know that we are liberated by God's grace? It sounds like law to me. It seems to be about what we need to do to be ready on that great and terrible day, so that we will be taken and not left behind. Blessed Advent? Bah humbug!

There is a secular counterpart to this apocalypse. We have long frightened children into good behavior in the weeks before Christmas by singing "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." You know the words to the song, the admonition that children remain cheerful, obedient and on the ready. The day is drawing nigh. And if that isn't enough to instill dread and the possible need for future therapy into the hearts of children, the song continues with the specter of the omniscient Claus—sleeping or waking children are never beyond his gaze.

It's interesting that pop culture can give voice to the prevailing theology of many in our congregations. We don't trust that God's promised grace is real and for us. So we come to believe and act that the word of God is not gracious, but vengeful and punishing. Through that lens there is no way we can see the gospel for the first Sunday in Advent as the announcement that we are liberated by God's grace.

But hear the good news. Jesus *was* announcing the end of the world—a world in bondage to sin and death, a world that believes in a god of "what have you done for me lately?" It's the day of God's vengeance. And this is what God's vengeance looks like—a helpless baby in a stable in Bethlehem, a helpless man on a cross outside of Jerusalem.

Matthew 24:36-44 is God's word of promise, a gift to us that we might open ourselves, our eyes, our lives to the incredible, surprising, immeasurable and intimate love of God. It's right there in front of us—two men working in a field, two women grinding meal, in the ordinary, in the everyday. God doesn't want us to miss it. God wants us to watch. **✚**

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: [bishop@elca.org](mailto:bishop@elca.org). This column is based on her reflection for a new collection of Advent devotions by Eaton and leaders of the Anglican Church of Canada, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Episcopal Church (download at [elca.org](http://elca.org)).

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