

Living in the Present Moment

Matthew 24:36-44

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Advent 1

³⁶“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.

I

This year in July, Tim LaHaye died. He was co-author of the *Left Behind* series, a set of 12 fictional books on the end times. The *Left Behind* books tell the story of how all the true believers in Christ are instantly raptured away into heaven, leaving the world in chaos. In this chaos, a new leader arises who becomes the secretary-general of the United Nations. It turns out that this new leader is the Antichrist, who is controlled by Satan. The *Left Behind* books sold millions of copies and made a lot of evangelical Christians believe that the world will come to an end any day now. LaHaye’s first book in the *Left Behind* series was published 21 years ago, but so far as I know the rapture hasn’t happened yet.

Tim LaHaye was a dispensational premillennialist. The modern roots of dispensational premillennialism go back to John Nelson Darby, a renegade Anglican priest from the 1800s who spent most of his adult life arguing that biblical history is divided into 7 “ages” or “dispensations.” He said that right now we live in the 6th age or dispensation, called “the dispensation of grace,” when God judges people based on their personal relationship with Christ. Soon the final dispensation will come. This is where things start to get murky, because different dispensational premillennialists disagree with each other about some of the details. But basically the idea is that Christ is going to return any minute now, snatch up all the good Christians into heaven, and for 7 years

leave the world in a chaotic mess called “the tribulation.” At the end of that 7-year tribulation, the wicked will be destroyed in the final battle of Armageddon, and then Christ will return with all his saints to set up a new kingdom here on earth that will last 1,000 years.

Dispensational premillennialism is a neat and tidy system of belief that has become hugely popular for some evangelical Christians. The problem, though, is that a lot of it isn't in the Bible. The word “rapture,” for instance, never appears in scripture, let alone that tongue-twister “dispensational premillennialism.” Nowhere does the Bible specifically lay out a scheme of 7 dispensations. And for Anabaptist Mennonites, dispensational premillennialists have a troubling tendency to glorify war and violence. Tim LaHaye's books, for example, are quite violent.

You might have noticed that when some Christians become too heavenly minded they are no earthly good. Shortly after I was baptized at the age of 12, I read Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Hal Lindsey was another dispensational premillennialist whose book was wildly popular in the 1970s. As a teenager I was enthralled with *The Late Great Planet Earth* because it suggested that the end of the world was probably going to happen in the 1980s. I was so mesmerized that now in retrospect I realize the book did some strange things to me. I had a hard time concentrating on my homework, because after all, why bother with your homework when you're going to be snatched into heaven any minute now?

My brief foray into dispensational premillennialism also drained any compassion I had for our neighbors. In 1969 my parents moved us to a poor white neighborhood on the north side of Elkhart, just a few houses up the street from Roselawn Mennonite Church, which is now called True Vine Tabernacle. My parents wanted to throw themselves more fully into Roselawn's mission efforts in the neighborhood. Once we settled into the neighborhood, it was easy for us to spot the signs of how our neighbors' lived: the rusted cars belching blue smoke out the back, the empty beer cans scattered in the front yards, the loud fights, the snarling dogs. It was the mission of our church to be compassionate to these neighbors, to extend them the mercy of God in the name of Christ.

But any compassion I had for our neighbors evaporated when I read Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It seemed pointless to do the things Jesus talks about in Matthew 25, namely to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick. Why bother with the pesky neighbors and their problems when the great battle of Armageddon would begin any day now? I'm grateful to my sensible father for saving me from my youthful obsession with Hal Lindsey. Since Dad knew scripture at least as well as any of our pastors did, he patiently showed me another way to understand the Bible, one that was thoroughly Mennonite.

II

I don't understand all the reasons dispensational premillennialism has been popular, but people seem to like it partly because it gives them a kind of comfort. The people who subscribe to this way of thinking don't like surprises. Instead they want to know exactly what's going to happen in the future, to be certain about what's coming next.

Matthew isn't interested in any of this stuff. Indeed, in today's reading Jesus explicitly says that only God knows "about that day and hour" (v. 36). None of the angels know, and even the earthly Jesus himself didn't know. Matthew's point is clear: if neither the angels know nor Jesus knows, then none of us could possibly know either, and all our efforts to predict when Jesus is coming back are just idle speculation.

Jesus would like us to set aside all idle speculation about the day and the hour of the Son of Man, and instead, to live here and now. The kernel of his advice comes in verse 42: "keep awake." In other words, pay attention to what is happening around you right now. Be alert to the present moment.

Most of us have deeply-ingrained habits of living in either the past or the future. If you tend to live in the past, perhaps you get caught up in feelings of regret about the opportunities you didn't take advantage of, or the stupid and hurtful things you did that now you wish you could undo. On the other hand, if you tend to live in the future perhaps you're afraid of all the bad things that could happen, or of how you're going to

cope. I bet some of you are at this moment skulking around somewhere in the past, or else dreaming about today's lunch and all the things you'd like to do this afternoon.

We hardly ever live in the present moment. Our child has a question but we're off in some other part of the country. Our spouse wants to talk about her day, but we're still wrapped up in the stuff from our own day. Our friend sits across the table, smiling at us over a cup of tea, but we almost miss the smile because we're strategizing how to finish the paper for Tuesday's history class.

My particular problem is sliding off somewhere into the future. I frequently dream and scheme about how my life would be better if I could just escape to a warm, sunny place in the winter; if I could actually get around to doing centering prayer twice a day for 30 minutes; if I could live a slower, more contemplative pace; if I could only do this or that. On and on it goes, my mind jumping from one possibility to the other—which means I hardly ever live in the present moment. When I'm stuck in the future, I can't really live in the present. This hurts my relationships with other people. How can I give them my full attention when I'm constantly thinking about next year or the year after that?

Wake up and live in the present moment, says Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is near at hand, right now (3:2). In every moment God infuses the world with God's own presence. Our first response is to notice it, to keep our eyes peeled and our ears sharp for this divine presence. That's really what it means to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. Watch and wait. Live in the present moment as much as you can. Give your full attention to the person beside you, to the work in front of you, to the need tugging on your sleeve. Every morning when you get out of bed, choose "to live the life God has given you to live right now."¹ Live fully in the present, so that whether you're grinding flour or working in the field, whether you're playing with your children or buying groceries at Kroger, you are ready for the God who comes to you in every moment with an endless reservoir of grace and peace.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Don't Say When: Expecting the Second Coming," *The Christian Century*, September 21, 2004, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-09/dont-say-when>, accessed November 14, 2016.

Will Jesus return in our lifetimes? Possibly, but what's really important is how we are living the lives God has given us in the present. How fully are we responding to the people around us right now, to the opportunities before us at this very moment? How awake are we to the God who eternally lives in the present moment?