

"Is it Thanksgiving already? Have they turned on the Plaza lights already? Is it Advent already?" Have you said any of those things this week? Well, congratulations! You've got the Advent spirit. Advent alarms us that it's later than you think. Jesus says this theme dominated the days of Noah. Maybe people wondered, "Is it raining already?" It's later than you think. The obvious conclusion is: be prepared.

Now, you might be thinking, "I'll bet he's going to prepare us by telling us the background to this Gospel." I could do that. I could tell you that the first Sunday of Advent begins a new church year. Or that we heard from Matthew today because this year highlights his Gospel. I could tell you that Matthew structures his Gospel with five big sermons, each followed by stories of Jesus' life, and that those five sermons cover the sermon on the mount, mission, parables, community, and the end of the world, because if you knew that, you'd probably guess quite correctly that today's Gospel comes from the fifth sermon. And if you wondered why at the beginning of the church year, the beginning of Advent, and the beginning of our weekly readings from Matthew, why do we begin with the end of the gospel, I could tell you that since the end of the world hasn't happened yet but the birth of Jesus has, by beginning with the end of the world Advent becomes a season that's alive for the twentieth century, not just for the first century. I could tell you all that, but I won't. If I did I would have missed the point of today's Gospel.

Some people think the only way to be prepared is to have knowledge, to know when the end is coming. They scour the Bible for clues, especially the Book of Revelation. They predict the end will come in our lifetime. If we knew the end is coming, for example, in the year 2000, we'd have seven years to sin and one month to repent--the month when we give our charge cards one final statement-free workout. But Jesus says you don't know when the end is coming; the Son of Man will come when you least expect him. Being prepared doesn't mean knowing when; being prepared means watchful living. It means living each day honorably.

In Noah's day, the problem was not ignorance; it wasn't that people didn't know there'd be a flood or didn't know how to live honorably. The problem was carelessness. People were eating, drinking, and marrying, right up to the day Noah entered the ark. They were totally unconcerned until the flood came and destroyed them. It's not that we don't know what to eat and drink; we're careless. It's not that we don't know how to pray to God, how to love our family, how to support our church. It's that we're careless. The last judgment won't test us on our knowledge about how many sermons there are in Matthew's Gospel; it'll test us on how careful we were in living the Gospel honorably.