

**Pastor Troy Schreiner—Victory Lutheran Church, Jacksonville**

**December 1, 2019—First Sunday of Advent**

**Series/Theme: Christmas Preparations—Keep Watch!**

**Sermon Text: Matthew 24:36-44—Certainty in the Unknown**

Is there a more annoying phrase in customer service than, “Your repairman will arrive sometime between the hours of 8am and 4pm”? Whether it’s the plumber or the pest control company, a vague, unknown arrival time is frustrating because it forces you to be ready, not just when the repairman arrives, but also the whole time before he shows up! And that’s really annoying when you’d rather do basically anything besides waiting for the repairman.

But as annoying as “sometime between 8 and 4” is, think how much worse it’d be if you were told, “Your repairman will arrive...sometime.” No time frame, no best guess; just a promise that eventually he’ll come. It’d be crippling, right? You couldn’t go to work, or out to eat, or grocery shopping without worrying that they’d show up while you were away. You couldn’t be certain you were prepared for them unless you never left home— and that’s not exactly practical, is it?

Today is the beginning of a new church year with the season of Advent. Advent means “coming,” so during this season called Advent, we prepare our hearts for Jesus’ two arrivals— his first coming at Christmas, and his coming again at Judgment Day.

We know when Christmas will be. We’ve got Advent calendars and kids to help us know the exact number of days until Christmas. But we can’t say the same about when Jesus will come again at Judgment Day. For two millennia, people have tried and failed to predict the exact date of Judgment Day. But here’s an insider secret. Do you know how many times in the Bible God addresses the exact time when Jesus will return? Once. Here in Matthew 24. Ready? Got your calendar out? Jesus says, ***“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”***

The Bible reveals that only God knows when Jesus will come again! Basically, “Jesus will arrive...sometime.” No time frame, no best guess. Just a promise that eventually he’ll come. While unknown timing usually leaves us feeling uncertain, afraid, or anxious, the unknown timing of Judgment Day doesn’t have to. We can have **Certainty in the Unknown.** How? By making the proper preparations!

Jesus tells us that we 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans are, pardon the pun, in the same boat as the people in Noah’s day. Just as the time of Judgment Day is unknown to us, they didn’t know when God’s judgment was coming either.

***“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them away.”***

As you heard in the first lesson, God instructed Noah to build an enormous boat, the “ark.” In that ark, God would save Noah and his family from the flood he was going to send to destroy the wicked, unbelieving world. In love, God warned Noah and his contemporaries, “Judgment is coming.” And in love, God gave them every opportunity they needed to repent and turn from their wickedness.

He gave them 120 years to repent of their sin before the flood came. Every day, God gave them the visual reminder of his warning. Certainly, Noah building this huge ship in the desert wouldn’t have escaped their

notice. Wouldn't you think they'd be scrambling to repent? Falling all over each other to pick up hammers and saws and help Noah build? But because of their unbelief, they were blind and deaf to God's warnings.

And because they didn't believe, they weren't prepared. Imagine the people eating a meal, or attending a wedding like any other day, oblivious to the impending destruction. Imagine the initial curiosity giving way to panicked fear when the rain first started falling. Imagine the screams of terror and regret when the springs burst from the ground and the world started filling with water. After 120 years of scoffing and mocking Noah's ark, they finally believed. But by then it was too late! They hadn't prepared themselves in the lead up, so they weren't prepared when judgment arrived.

Next time you're shopping at Town Center, or at a Jags game, or stuck in traffic on 295, think of this: How many of the people around you have heard the warnings about Judgment Day, but go about their lives without thinking twice about Jesus? How many feel no urgency to prepare, because they don't believe Jesus will come back?

But then, when was the last time you thought about the fact that Jesus could come back literally any minute? How does that change the way you live your life? We easily get caught up in the "here and now" too, don't we? Because Jesus will return at an unknown time, does that mean we can push it out of our minds because it's so far off?

Not at all. Just like the massive boat being built in the desert in Noah's day, God has also given us visual signs to remind us that Jesus is coming back. Earlier in Matthew 24, Jesus described what the "End Times"—the time between Jesus' ascension and Jesus' return-- will look like. He says, ***"You will hear of wars and rumors of war." "There will be famines and earthquakes." "You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, you will be hated by all nations because of me." "Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people." "Many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other." "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold."*** Sounds like today's news headlines, right? These signs of the End Times have been visible since Jesus returned to Heaven and are still happening today. That means that right now, we're in the End Times. And that means Jesus could return literally any second!

That adds urgency to our preparations, doesn't it? It's kind of like pregnancy. Mom and Dad are far more urgent to pack the hospital bag and paint the nursery in week 35 than they were in week 3, because at week 35, the baby could come at any time! In the same way, we prepare for Jesus' return with greater urgency when we understand that Judgment Day could come at any minute.

Imagine a teacher assigning a paper which counts for 100% of the student's course grade. But the due date for the paper is due is listed as "unknown." And turning in the paper late means you automatically fail the course. Some might be gutsy enough to procrastinate. Some might believe the teacher was bluffing. But the smart student would make finishing that paper immediately their highest priority. Likewise, making sure we're prepared for Jesus' unknown return should be our highest priority!

But how exactly do we prepare ourselves for Judgment Day? Spend our whole lives standing outside, staring up into the sky waiting for Jesus? That's not exactly practical! Jesus compares it to defending your home from robbers. Obviously, thieves don't text you, "Hey, FYI, we're coming to rob you at midnight." Thieves arrive at unknown times when they're least expected! So, unless you're patrolling your house 24/7, how can you be certain you're prepared?

That's what security systems are for! That's why ADT Home Security uses the slogan, "Always There." We can't always be prepared for thieves, but security systems don't leave home or fall asleep. They're supposed to defend us from thieves, even when they come at unexpected times.

That's why we also need spiritual "security systems" so we're always prepared for Jesus' second coming. As Jesus says, "***the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.***" A spiritual security system makes us prepared for Jesus' return whenever it happens.

That spiritual security system is our faith! If we have faith that Jesus is our Savior, then we can have absolute certainty that whenever he returns, Judgment Day will be a day of grace and glory, rather than judgment and destruction. Like the teacher who assigned the paper with the unknown deadline, our deadline is unknown also. But our loving Teacher has already written the perfect paper, put our name on it, and handed it in on our behalf. By faith in Jesus, the perfect score Jesus achieved with his life and his death is already credited to your name in the gradebook of Heaven! That means just like God kept Noah and his family safe from the flood in the ark, at Judgment Day, God will keep you perfectly safe in Jesus!

But that doesn't mean we can stop preparing. If you install a security system, but don't pay the monthly fees to keep it running, it won't stop the thieves. If you install a smoke detector, but never change the batteries, it won't warn you about fires. If we fail to keep strengthening our faith, then we aren't prepared for Jesus' coming.

That's why, although we have certainty in the unknown, we also have a sense of urgency to prioritize keeping our faith strong and secure! That means charging our spiritual batteries by regularly hearing and studying the Word, through which the Holy Spirit strengthens the faith that gives us certainty! It means "***putting aside the deeds of darkness and putting on the armor of light.***" End Times urgency means living like citizens of Heaven, even while we wait for Jesus to come and take us there!

If we understand the importance of maintaining our earthly security systems, how much more important is it for us to maintain our spiritual security system as we await Jesus' return!

It also means we'll care about the spiritual security systems of others! Parents feeding and encouraging their kids with God's Word, like with Advent devotions. Spouses praying and studying God's Word together. Christians inviting their friends, neighbors, and co-workers to join them for worship. Because the days are unknown, we do everything we can to help us and others know Christ!

Whether Jesus returns today between the hours of noon and 4, or in 400 years, we're prepared if we cling to Jesus by faith! So brothers and sisters, prepare your hearts this Advent, and every day, with End Times urgency, and with End Times certainty.