

## **“This Year Still, God Chooses Mercy”**

### **Matthew 24:36-44**

According to the church calendar, this is the first week in Advent. On the Sunday of the first week in Advent, the church acknowledges that there will come an end to the world, and at the end a judgment.

But we also take refuge in the mercy of God, because God grants us again, year after year after year, more time – time in which we might hear the Christmas story again. We hear and believe that story – that among us is an Emmanuel. God is with us.

The text set aside in our 3 year lectionary cycle for this particular Sunday of the church year reminds us of the end, and therefore could frighten us. Many of us are frightened by scientists who warn us we are destroying our earth. Some of us are frightened by more and more nations with nuclear weapons.

Jesus says, “As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two people will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. ‘Watch therefore’, says Jesus, ‘for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have left his house to be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.’”

As a child, I remember this particular text and this particular Sunday scaring me some. Oh, I know the importance of watching and being ready. I understand that no one knows when the Savior will return.

But there has always been the beauty that at the end of one year, another year has started. There has always been another Advent, another preparation for the Good Tidings of Great Joy – that I believe is the mercy of God. God continues to gift us with time that the Christmas story will be told one more time this year – at least once more – so that this good news, these great tidings of joy, might again carry our souls toward faith in Jesus Christ.

I'd like to tell you a story, share with you one of my visions of heaven.

In this vision, I'm looking in to heaven and listening in on a conversation between God and the angel Gabriel. Gabriel is disappointed and angry with us folks on earth and would like to bring the world to an end. But God, in his love and mercy, gives us one more chance.

My vision, which I hope helps prepare us for the coming of Christmas.

I looked, and behold: a door was opened in heaven.

And an enormous voice, like my grandpa's voice, was talking with me, saying, "Come here. I want you to hear and see something that afterward you can share with others". It was good to hear his voice, but I was still hesitant to follow him into the heavenly places.

I heard booming voices and I saw a blinding throne. He who sat on the throne was speaking. "Again, Gabriel!" boomed the voice in the light. "Go down and tell my people again the Good Tidings of Great Joy that a Savior has been born!"

I looked, and I saw an angel standing on the air. He held in his hands an unsealed scroll, darkened on both sides with much writing, and he wore a darker frown upon his face. He hesitated, saying nothing, frowning but doing nothing.

The voice of God said, "Gabriel!"

Then the angel bowed down, down before the shining Deity and I heard him speak.

He said, still bowing, “Do you mind if I do more than sing Gloria in Excelsius?

Do you mind if I take my trumpet this time? How about if I sound the trumpet this year?”

Gabriel’s frown was the storm that threatens in the distance and his voice was the Great Lakes wind blowing from the north.

But the voice of God said, “Ah, Gabriel. Not yet, Gabriel.”

The angel Gabriel set his jaw and gathered his robes around himself. “Begging your pardon, Highness,” he muttered, trying hard to seem subservient yet consumed with righteousness.

“I know you know everything. But I have gone this route before, 2,019 times before, declaring the same good tidings! And, according to my estimate, there has been no change among the people through the centuries. Rather they are moved by bad news and don’t even want to listen to the good news. Now, Lord, the trumpet –.”

“And you, dear Gabriel, by my estimate,” said the voice of the one upon the throne, “have argued this same case before 2, 019 times! I am a patient Deity”.

“Patient? Patient? Too patient!” roared the angel.

The voice of God did not answer. During the divine silence the angel gained control of himself and decided on a more reasoned approach.

“Listen, this is the way it was,” Gabriel said. “The first time you sent me, I told the shepherds of your sign, and they went and looked. They saw the Babe in the manger and they believed. Thirty three years later I told the ladies that the Son had risen. I delivered that message, too. The ladies told the disciples and they went out and told the world. But then, what happened?”

Nothing!” snapped the angel. “Nothing happened! Nothing except that my eyes were opened to the human nature”.

The angel loosened his scroll and blackened the sky with the length of it. “This year I have kept a list”.

“Wars”, he read, “continual, in which none are unrighteous, but every side considers itself justified and on the side of God. Wars unaccountable in which not only the fighters are killed but the children are killed, too. Wars perpetual –.”

“The Lord,” whispered the Lord in light, “the Lord God is merciful and gracious”.

“Divorces!” Gabriel read on, unhearing, “3,624,007,002 counts of adultery, and babies born of these unloved and unprotected. Racism. Child abuse. Dishonoring parents. Wife beatings. Mass shootings. . .”

“Long-suffering”, whispered the Lord in light, “abundant in goodness and truth”.

“Murders of all kinds. Pride. Gossip so destroying”.

“Keeping mercy for thousands”, whispered the Lord.

“Poverty on purpose! Wealthy corporations taking advantage of the poor. Starving children. Parents and children dying from malnutrition and disease. Instead of feeding its homeless and hungry people, a government that wastes millions of dollars to put its ruler on trial for something he confessed to doing before the trial even began.

“Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin!” said the voice of God.

“Gluttony with laziness that insults the bodies you created!”

“Gabriel!” cried the Lord. “I have heard your list,” said the voice of the Lord in the visible whirlwind. And the scroll suddenly exploded into fire and heaven glowed a violent orange as the list of sins melted from his hands.

The angel Gabriel was humbled and sank to his knees upon the air. He lowered his face.

The Lord God consoled him, “Gabriel, Gabriel”, whispered the Lord. “I am life. Your list concerned death. I choose mercy one more time! I choose, Gabriel, to let them live”.

Then I heard the voice of God again, in love with his messenger: “Gabriel, go. Descend, dear angel, one more time. Find some shepherds willing to cry the truth out one more time – that they are forgiven your list, Gabriel that they need not die eternally”.

“The trumpet” said the Lord in the royal light, “the trumpet is for the day when I cease to say, ‘Once more, go down once more.’ The trumpet, Gabriel, shall transform them forever. But today there’s still some change I seek. Some turning. Some warmer flicker of faith. Tell the shepherd, Gabriel. Tell the shepherd again our tidings of great joy. Tell all the shepherds to seek the signs of the Savior again: a humble manger, wood for a crib, wood for a cross, flesh that lives and dies for others, dies and rises again! Go down Gabriel and sing the Gloria! Sing it now, that by Easter, by the coming Easter some may have buried their lives in ours and changed! Christmas, Gabriel, once more this year let there be a Christmas”.

As I awake from this dream and am surrounded by the realities of this world, I see and feel a world in need of profound forgiveness. We all have the tendency to judge and punish one another. Sometimes out of guilt, we punish ourselves as we approach Christmas. This is the

wonder of God's love and the sweetness of God's mercy, that however hard humans may become upon ourselves, year after year God gives us forgiveness.

And so, now I'm thinking, not just that Christmas is coming; I'm thinking that Christmas is coming again, over and over again. Let's look toward Christmas, then, with that clear awareness of our forgiveness, and let's give thanksgiving for it.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, you came once into the world. Once for all time you died for our sins and you rose to declare that those sins were covered over and that we are forgiven. But we give you thanksgiving that year after year that message is also repeated. Sometimes our ears are stubborn, or sometimes we are so filled with guilt, with self-accusation, that we need the sweet message sung in the powerful voice of angels unto us. So then, our prayer is, too, thanksgiving that there is forgiveness but at the same time a begging that the angels would gather round us, and round all those who have not yet been persuaded of that forgiveness. One more time let Gabriel sing. Let the voices of faith sing around us the sweet declaration: We are forgiven. We are held in the palm of your hand. We are covered over with your mercy. AMEN.

May the peace of God . . .

#282 –It Came Upon the Midnight Clear