

Richmond Hill  
Richmond, Virginia  
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1 Advent  
Matthew 24:26-44  
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## **The Days of Noah**

“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*)

### **The Son of Man has already come**

I want to suggest to you tonight that the Son of Man has already come, and that he is here – that he is fully engaged in this dramatic history of which we are a part here in Richmond and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is a chaotic, almost apocalyptic time. Here in metropolitan Richmond, the follies of the centuries are catching up with us, and it is touch and go whether we will be able to change rapidly enough to avoid destruction. The life of the city is on the line.

This is our city, and we know a little about what is going on here. It is matched by the life of every other city in America, each with its own local story. Having allowed local life to erode, and local relationships to atrophy; having depended on a nationalized economy which treated each city as a colony to be exploited and abandoned; we are entering a time of significant desperation. Already the unemployment in the central part of this four-jurisdiction city is so great that the state of Virginia has virtually withdrawn all job aid from it, placing the Virginia Employment Commission and emergency Federal workforce centers in suburban offices available only by private vehicle.

Nationally, the signs of the times are extremely disturbing. The government is in paralysis, choked by the same overweening greed which has impoverished the cities and sent a high percentage of America’s best jobs overseas in the last three decades. Unemployment is at a record high, while Wall Street and American corporations have just announced record profits.

Internationally, both the economic and political situations are distressing and daunting. This is not a benign, comfortable world we are living in.

### **Are we living in the days of Noah?**

Here's the way the world was described in the book of Genesis at the time of Noah: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth." (*Genesis 6:11-12*)

Jesus said, "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Like many passages in the New Testament which refer to the coming of the Son of Man, this one is frequently interpreted to refer to a Second Coming of Christ sometime that is still in the future – a dramatic ending, presumably, to history as we know it. Or, alternatively, some scholars say that this passage refers to Jesus' own premonition about either his own death or his resurrection.

Neither interpretation is, I think, satisfactory, and both make of this passage in the scripture an historical oddity which can be insulated from any meaning in our own time. Either it has happened, in which case it is beside the point; or it is going to happen any minute, in which case we should get ready but not expect history to continue.

Here's the most likely meaning of this teaching: All of these days, -- the days when Jesus was living and preaching and the days we are currently undergoing – are like the days of Noah. The Son of Man is constantly coming and intervening in our history. These are the days of the Son of Man.

In the days of the Son of Man,  
Time is not incidental. And  
Time is not accidental. Rather,  
Time is of the essence.

### **Time is not incidental.**

Space and time are always connected. At every moment you are somewhere, doing something. Space and time are the only non-abstract things there are. If you want to be specific about human life, you give a time and you give a place, or even more specifically, a specific person in a place.

We are accustomed, particularly in this country, to treating time as incidental. Money, transportation, and electronic media help to remove us from time and place. We can conduct our business anywhere at any time. We can communicate words anywhere at any time. So long as we have money, we can place our bodies anywhere at any time. We are not dependent on one group of people: we can drive from group to group. We are not dependent on the weather: we can control the temperature and protect ourselves. If we have investments, we are less dependent on a job or on particular people: we get our income anyway. We don't need the poor. Our relationships are interchangeable, at our own discretion, so long as we can pay for what we want. We are not dependent on any

particular place: so long as we have cars we can drive almost anywhere. Money, transportation, and electronic media help to remove us from time and place.

We think in generalities, we buy in generalities, we talk in generalities, we worship in generalities, we vote in generalities, we live in generalities. Our time and place are defined by the television news or by the goods we buy on Black Friday. We are without place and time – until we have an accident, or we are hurt, or we can't do without someone, or we lose our money, or someone or something really matters.

That's how it was in the days of Noah, Jesus said, and how it will be in the days of the Son of Man. In those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Time did not matter. It was incidental to everything they wanted, everything we want.

But that was not the way it was for Noah. Time was not incidental for Noah. At a certain time and place, if you were there without a boat, you would drown. Time was of the essence. Noah entered the ark, but everybody else knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. So too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

We may think that time is incidental. That is, to be sure, the normal human feeling. Whether it is painful or pleasureable or just happening, we move from thing to thing as if there were nothing really happening, as if this were not the great life-and-death drama of the history of the redemption of the world. Unless or until we are forced into another posture by a crisis, time is simply incidental to us. But Jesus questions that. To those that are listening, history is happening, and it is happening a lot faster than we think. Time is not incidental. And

### **Time is not accidental**

When you treat most time as incidental, then you end up thinking time is accidental as well.

There is such a thing as an accident. A friend of mine just suffered from a horrible accident. It was not intended by anyone. It could not easily have been prevented. It happened, and it is catastrophic. We are praying with and for him. The question is not whether God intended his suffering – God didn't. The question is, how can God help him in the aftermath – and that is what God wants.

There are genuine accidents. But there are also accidents waiting to happen. Two years ago, the American economy was an accident waiting to happen. For more than thirty years, an increasing number of the economic leaders of America had been ripping off the nation, giving up on community and productive values, and destroying the fundamental economic structure of our communities.

We have only begun to experience the effects of the crash that has begun.

What happened was the direct result of actions taken in history by persons who were at best lost, and at worst captive to the negative forces of the universe. It happened in time and in history, by specific legislation and leveraged buyouts and junk bonds and collateralized debt obligations and credit default swaps. It happened by indifference to time and place, by indifference to neighbor and greed.

What happened to America was no accident. What is in danger of happening to metropolitan Richmond will be no accident. Every day is an opportunity to return to God, to return to essentials, to rebuild community, to establish justice, to relate across lines of class and race and religion and jurisdiction and politics. Everybody has specific opportunities and specific tasks. The agendas are particular, but they are not arbitrary. Your imagination and your knowledge will tell you your assignment.

Time is not accidental. Accidents do happen. But they are not the primary theme of the narrative. That's the way they thought in Noah's time. They were marrying and giving in marriage. Two people were on a housetop. In the days of the Son of Man, time is not incidental. And time is not accidental. Rather,

### **Time is of the essence.**

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. Things will happen, and if you don't have a clue, it will look accidental. But it won't be. People will be called to do things – and if you don't know the Son of Man is around, it will simply be arbitrary to you. History is moving, and God is moving history. Part of the way he is moving history is to move you and me in history; -- not history in abstract, but rather in the things we know, the place we live, the community and city he is attempting to transform.

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming to get you, to summon you into your next task, your next visit, your next prophecy, your next opportunity.

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. You can only be ready, you can't fully understand the time of things.

There are times to move and times not to move. Sometimes you need to be ready without even knowing what you will be asked to do. Sometimes being ready means to be active at doing the only thing you understand, or the last task you were assigned. Sometimes it means waiting and looking around to be alert to something new.

Therefore you also must be ready, as in the days of Noah: for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. This time is not merely incidental to our own designs. Nor is it accidental – something without rhyme or reason. This time is God's. It is his history of salvation. This is Richmond. And it is the 29<sup>th</sup> day of November, 2010. Today, if you want to make a difference, time is of the essence. AMEN.