



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “Are You Ready”

**Scripture Lessons: *Isaiah 2:1-5: Mathew 24:36-44***

***This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. James T. Rogers on  
Sunday, November 27, 2022 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church  
in Charleston, South Carolina.***

‘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 .

A number of years ago, as I was setting up for a parent versus youth kickball game at Hazel Parker Playground, a friendly woman passed by our group in the parking lot. She handed me a flyer informing me that the end of the world would be on October 21. And prior to that, Judgment Day was scheduled for May 21. Well that was news to me! After I returned home I read through the pamphlet to see how such information had been determined. But the explanation given, which was printed in font size ten and used every side of the quad-fold brochure, was not very convincing. Even with all of the biblical references and the correct math, the interpretive leaps that one must make to follow the pamphlet’s line of reasoning were too much for me.

The Pennsylvania Bible fellowship that passed out this tract is certainly not alone in making end of the world prophecies. In fact, dozens of individuals and religious groups have given specific dates to the return of Christ and the end of the age, all of which have one thing in common: none of them ever came true. Into the midst of all of these speculations, Jesus says the following about his return: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, or the Son, but only the Father.” Even Jesus tells us that he doesn’t know the time of his return and because of that we should always be ready for that day.

Jesus tells us that his return will be as sudden and unexpected as the Flood. In those days people were eating and drinking – doing ordinary, everyday activities. They were marrying and giving in marriage – expecting and planning for the future. They knew nothing until Noah entered the ark and the flood came and swept them all away. Jesus also tells us that his return will be like a thief coming at night to break into someone’s home. Not the most comforting metaphor, if you ask me.

Jesus tells us that his return will bring judgement and no one is excluded. Two men will be working 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. One will be saved and one will be left behind. Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected and come with judgement, so we should always be ready.

Maybe this lectionary gospel reading wasn't the story you were expecting to hear as we turn from Thanksgiving into Christmas? And yet, the reality of this text is something we acknowledge all the time in the church. We affirm the words of the Apostles' Creed, saying that Jesus, "ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." When we gather for communion, we often hear the words, "For whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the saving death of our Lord, Jesus Christ until he comes again." And we know we need to be ready for his return.

I don't know about you, but this reading makes me anxious. Maybe it's because in my day to day life I often feel like I'm not ready for whatever's on the horizon. I'm not ready for that trip – I haven't even started packing. I'm not ready for the work week – I'm exhausted from the last one. I'm not ready for the school holidays – I haven't finalized childcare. I'm not ready for Christmas – I haven't even bought the first gift. I'm not ready for the new year – I haven't spent the money in my flexible spending account. And then I find myself in a social situation, and someone is just trying to be polite and make conversation, and they say, "Are you all ready for Christmas?" I know I'm supposed to be ready for Jesus' return, and I'm struggling to get ready for Christmas.

Just like Jesus' return, there is so much in life that comes without warning, like the floodwaters during the time of Noah, like the thief breaking into the house in the middle of the night. We experience the sudden death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a miscarriage, a car accident, a heart attack. We know the fragility of human life and how unpredictable it can be, and yet we are regularly caught off guard and at times disoriented or even completely devastated.<sup>1</sup>

And so we do so much in an effort to protect ourselves and our loved ones. We buy insurance policies. We schedule annual check-ups with our doctor. We get vaccinated. We put money into savings accounts for a rainy day. We install burglar alarm systems to protect our homes. We say our prayers. We do these things because we know how unpredictable life is.<sup>2</sup>

It was into our fearful, scary, and unpredictable world, Jesus came as a little child. And the hope of today's text is that Jesus promises to come again. The one who walked this earth, who taught and healed, who faithfully endured death on the cross, and who was raised from the dead, will come again. The one who claims us in the waters of baptism, cleanses us from our sin, and adopts us into God's family will come again. The one who welcomes us to receive communion at the table, will come again. In a fearful world, we should not fear, for the Christ who judges us is the Christ who endured judgement for our sake. In an unpredictable world, we have hope, for Christ will return to claim us as his own. This hope is not something we can accomplish or

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<sup>1</sup> Lose, David, "A Sure and Certain Promise" *Working Preacher* [<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/a-sure-and-certain-promise>], November 22, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Lose, David, November 22, 2022.

manufacture ourselves – it only comes from God.

And today Jesus calls us to live into that hopeful reality. Jesus invites us to live into that hopeful reality in the midst of our eating and drinking - our normal, everyday activities. Jesus invites us to live into that hopeful reality in the midst of our planning for the future. And in doing so, we will be ready for his return.

In today's Old Testament lesson the Prophet Isaiah issues a similar invitation and puts it this way, "Let us walk in the light of the Lord!" This was a powerful invitation during a difficult time – during a time of war. The short of it is that the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus were defeated by the Assyrians, who were defending the southern kingdom of Judah.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath, the prophet Isaiah gives King Ahaz of Judah a word from God. In this time of struggle, Isaiah offers visions of a hopeful future and God's judgement.

And it is quite a vision, given that Jerusalem has been besieged by war. It's a vision of people from all nations going to God's house so that they may be taught in God's ways and walk in God's paths. It's a vision of God's judgement between the nations which leads to peace. With God as judge and arbitrator who brings peace, people no longer need weapons. Therefore, they transform their swords and spears into tools for agriculture. And there is no more war.

You know what I am ready for? The end of Russia's attack on Ukraine. I'm ready for a world where war is no more. I'm ready for a country where gun violence is no longer the norm. I'm ready for children to feel safe in their schools. I'm ready for the end of violence on college campuses and in the workplace. I'm ready for the end of violent attacks on the LGBT community. I'm ready for a world where earthquakes no longer cause utter destruction, where COVID no longer claims lives, and where the people of every nation live in peace and walk in God's ways.

Sounds absurd doesn't it? Maybe the more prudent idea would be to put our hope in Christmas gifts, holiday gatherings, and pageants, than to open ourselves up to the possibility of what seems impossible. I have to admit, that is quite tempting. Yet, Isaiah calls us to walk in the light of the Lord. Jesus, our Savior and our friend invites us to hope, for one day he will return to claim us as his own. The Bible tells us that on that great and glorious day, the wolf will live peaceably with the lamb. On that day, God will wipe every tear from our eyes. The Bible tells us that death shall be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

There is a small Jesuit Chapel on the campus of St. Louis University with a unique lighting design. Twentieth century cannon shells have been emptied of their explosive contents and now serve as light fixtures. Once weapons, now these cannon shells hold light for people to worship and pray by.<sup>4</sup>

On Friday night, my family attended an event at Riverbanks Zoo featuring one million lights. An otherwise dark campus was lit up with a number of impressive displays. Maybe you have been to

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<sup>3</sup> Birch, Bruce C., "Isaiah 2:1-5: Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 2010), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Duke, Paul Simpson, "Isaiah 2:1-5: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 2010), p. 7.

James Island County Park's Festival with over three miles of glimmering lights and 750 light displays? Maybe you are planning to visit Brookgreen Garden's "Nights of a Thousand Candles"? I know many of us will be decorating a tree with lights or setting up brightly lit outdoor decorations.

The season of Advent is an invitation, as days get shorter and nights lengthen, to look for the light of Christ in the midst of the darkness and to walk in the light of the Lord. Jesus' call for us to be ready for his return is not something we add to our overflowing to do lists, but instead a call to live daily with the hope that one day the one who died for us will return to call us home.

It's this type of living that we will affirm in today's affirmation of faith:

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of the darkness, look for the light, walk in the light, and shine the light. As we do so, we can be confident that we will be ready whenever Jesus returns.

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<sup>5</sup> A Brief Statement of Faith (PCUSA)