

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Year A, Advent 1, Matt. 24:36-44: 27 November 2016**  
**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

I was 6 years old and living in Peoria, IL, when my parents decided to take my two younger sisters and me to a small Baptist church for their annual revival services. Every evening for a week, we were harangued by the loud and seemingly angry evangelist about our need to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior before his soon-expected second coming—what the evangelist called the “rapture.” If we didn’t accept Jesus, he claimed, we would risk being “left behind.” Later, an entire book and movie industry would grow up around predicting when the rapture might occur and depicting life in the world for those who were left behind. At that time, however, I simply went home, crawled into bed, and pulled the covers over my head. I was afraid to sleep, believing that Jesus might return and I’d be left alone while my parents and sisters disappeared into the clouds. I prayed, as only a frightened child can, that if Jesus did come back he wouldn’t forget me.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new liturgical year, and themes such as those I just described are often discussed during this season. As most of us probably know, advent is derived from a Latin term meaning “to come” or “to arrive,” and the season of Advent—in a somewhat confusing sense, I think—celebrates both the coming of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry (next week we’ll hear from John the Baptist) and, at the same time, looks ahead to his promised return at the “second coming,” and all this while also anticipating his birth at Christmas. Given this liturgical setting, together with the readings chosen for the first Sunday of Advent, we may think that Baptist evangelist I heard as a child was correct to be warning us about the second coming of Jesus, even if we

don't use the language of the rapture to describe it (it's not a biblical term). But, in my preparation for this Sunday's sermon, I was led to rethink many of my own assumptions about how to interpret such lessons, and I wondered if some others of us may be just a little uncertain in our own interpretations.

Thankfully, the main *point* Jesus is making seems clear enough: stay awake! That's also a good Advent theme, and here he means something like "be vigilant." But, be vigilant about what? To what, exactly, is he referring? There are actually several questions we need answers to in order to understand Jesus in this lesson. In addition to the event he is referring to—the one, he says, that no one but God knows the day or hour it will occur—who is the Son of Man, and what might he have to do with the event? This phrase is presented in uppercase letters in our reading, signaling that it's being interpreted by the translators as a title, but is it a title for Jesus or some other figure? And finally, if we know about the "Left Behind" book series, what does it mean to be "taken," and is this the good thing those books assume it is? Biblical scholars, and average Christians, have struggled with passages like these for centuries, and I won't claim to give us the final, correct interpretation this morning, but I want to ask you to indulge me a bit while I try to unpack some of this. I'll try to end by suggesting why such passages are important for Christians today.

Given the glorious picture painted for us in the OT lesson from Isaiah, we probably think the coming event to which Jesus is referring is, indeed, his second coming. However, I've been persuaded by my own research (of NT Wright's series titled, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*) that Jesus is, in fact, not referring to his second coming—at least, not as we typically understand it—but is,

instead, referring to the same event we've been discussing the last few weeks, namely, the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem. As we've learned, this was a future event when Jesus predicted it, and when it happened in 70 AD it was utterly devastating for the Jewish people. Nevertheless, though he can't say exactly *when* it's going to happen, Jesus is claiming that this destruction is definitely coming. And when it does come, Jesus goes on to say—just as the long line of Jewish prophets before him—it will not be a random act of violence but, rather, the harsh judgment by God himself on his own people—judgment like that in Noah's day on those who were destroyed in the great flood. Moreover, when it happens, it will come upon them suddenly. This is the implication of his warning about some being "taken." Being taken carries the connotation, not of the rapture at the second coming, but of secret police coming in the dead of night or soldiers sweeping through a village during an invasion, taking those whom they can catch as the city falls—perhaps for interrogation, perhaps for torture and execution. And, as we saw earlier with Jewish apocalyptic language, the coming of the mysterious Son of Man signals, not the return of Jesus on clouds to save faithful Christians from the "Great Tribulation," but rather that these events will have cosmic significance for the Jewish people and even for the world.

Let me say just a bit more about the son of man. As a descriptive phrase and not as a title, it figures prominently in the book of Daniel, itself an apocalyptic book of prophecy that encourages Jews to remain faithful and to keep strong boundaries around their cultural identity during times of oppression. Daniel's willingness to be put into the lions' den and to trust in God's deliverance is given as example to follow. It is a book that was widely read and much debated just before and during the time of Jesus, especially the sections on Daniel's dreams or

visions and their interpretations. Originally, the “son of man” referred to the children of Adam, the first human created by God. In Daniel, however, it was applied not to all humans but to the nation of Israel in particular, who were viewed by Daniel as the *true* humans, the *true* children of Adam. In Daniel’s dreams, the true humans, Israel, were contrasted to the ravenous beasts that surrounded them, beasts that are themselves symbols for the pagan nations that for centuries invaded and dominated Jews and occupied their sacred land.

Later, the phrase son of man became associated with the Messiah in so far as the Messiah, as a king, represented the people of Israel in his person. Early followers of Jesus soon saw him as both the Messiah and the Son of Man (here, used as a title), but this is where things get a bit tricky. Jesus, as Messiah, did not claim to represent the Jewish people as a whole, but only those Jews who followed him—those he believed to be the true Israel. In Jesus’ view, the destruction of the Temple would indeed be marked by the Son of Man ushering in the return of God to Israel but, in contrast to the picture Isaiah gives us of the Temple being raised up and all nations streaming to it, Jesus predicts what might be called a great reversal. Instead of peace and prosperity—the glorious ending to the story that the Jews envisioned—Jesus tells his followers that God’s return would constitute a terrible judgment—a judgment not on the nations but on them as Jews! And, in other statements we didn’t read this morning, Jesus warns his followers to flee to the hills, to escape, before this happens.

So, should we care about all this arcane prophesy, symbols, and strange figures and titles? This is what I call the “so what?” question. If this interpretation is correct, the event Jesus is warning his followers about is in their future, but it is

in our distant past. So, part of the answer to why we should care has to do with the fact that early Christians believed that Jesus' life, ministry, and his paradoxically victorious death on the cross was vindicated—there's that word again—by the predicted destruction of the Temple. Here, vindicated means that Jesus was proved to be who they claimed him to be because his prophetic predictions came to pass. It's more complicated than that, but for now we can observe that this event was extremely important in confirming for early Christian their views of Jesus. In other words, what was a catastrophic tragedy for Jews was viewed very differently by those Jews who followed Jesus. In his person, Jesus quite literally replaced the Temple for them, that is, he made it redundant or unnecessary. Its destruction was also a great loss for those early Jewish Christians, but it just didn't carry the same weight for them as it did for other Jews and, again and more importantly, it served to confirm their faith in Jesus.

While it is important for Christians today to acknowledge that our existence as Christians hinges on the vindication of Jesus when his awful prediction of the Temple's destruction actually came to pass, this prediction also raises questions about our own views of Jesus and his message for us. We tend to think of Jesus as "meek and mild," sitting on a grassy hillside or in a small boat, gently teaching his disciples and inviting children to sit on his knee. And that is, in part, who Jesus seemed to be. But the view that emerges from this morning's lesson also suggests that Jesus could be a fierce, if perhaps somewhat sorrowful, prophet, working his way from the fringes of his society right into the heart of a major geopolitical fight that was going on in Jerusalem. As a prophet, he predicted the greatest cataclysm Jews could imagine and I wonder, if such a Jesus were here among us today, would we like him? Would we follow him, or would we draw back from him in

fear? Or, perhaps we would simply be embarrassed? I, for one, want to take seriously his warning to other Jews around him. That warning is this: We should not take it for granted that God is always “on our side” (I resist drawing parallels to our own recent election, but it is tempting to do so). Jesus’ prediction for the Jews in Jerusalem was extremely harsh and it was hard for them to hear, and it is a harsh message for us to hear. His comfort will come later. But, for now, Jesus is reminding us that God’s ways are not always our ways. What might that mean for us? In Advent, in an unstable world not unlike Jesus’ own in many ways, I urge *us* to keep awake, to stay vigilant. Amen.