TICK, TOCK
A Sermon on Matthew 24:36-44—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
November 28, 2010—First United Church of Christ, Milford, CT

[Jesus said,] "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."

I.
Tom Long writes: “Frank Kermode...says that the basic structure of a plot is this: tick...tock. Tick gets the plot going, but everything leans forward and is governed by the tock.” Kermode writes, ‘The Greeks...thought that even the gods could not change the past; but Christ did change it, rewrote it, and in a new way fulfilled it...the End changes all.”

That is why as the Christian calendar starts a new year and we begin our year-long travels with the Gospel of Matthew, we do not begin with chapter one or with Mary and Joseph quite yet, but instead dive right into to chapter 24 and Jesus’ eschatological vision of how history will end. We are intentionally being reminded that the action of God at the end of our Christian story changes the tone and nature of the whole story, going back to its very origins. The tock of God’s story ahead of us colors the tick behind us and even the tick of this moment, right now, in our own lives.

In today’s reading Jesus tells us that a day is coming when the Son of Man, whom we interpret as Jesus, will return, and heaven and earth will pass away (bleed together perhaps?). Jesus is talking about eschatology—discussion of the culmination of history, an imagined and anticipated moment when human history comes to a close and we are brought forth into a new reality related to but not the same as this life. It is eschatology that the spiritual tune refers to when it is sung: “Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming, Oh yes I know.” By discussing his return, Jesus seeks to give his audience hope, knowing that Jesus will bring about history’s tock.

But Jesus emphasizes that the timing of that eschatological day is un-known, to us and even to him. He compares the coming of the Son to a thief breaking into a house. Knowing when the Son of Man is coming back, Jesus says, is about as likely as a thief calling you up and making reservations to rob your house: “Is 3 a.m. okay with you? Great!” Thieves don’t operate that way and neither does God. It’s not God’s job to tell us when our end or the world’s end may come.

Jesus describes God’s final activity in the world as surprising but not as totally unpredictable either. He makes this relatively lengthy comparison between the coming of the Son of Man and the story told in Genesis of the moment when the 40-day flood began, when people were unexpectedly and literally swept up into God’s definitive and unavoidable, destructive yet also saving activity in the world.

Because we know stories of God’s sudden, unpredictable, surprising and definitive breakings into history, and we are told that the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour, Jesus encourages his listeners to stay awake, to stay awake and be filled with hope in God’s promises.

This all leads us to a question: Jesus explains that the homeowner would have stayed awake if he had known when the thief was coming—which implies that when the homeowner doesn’t know the time, he doesn’t stay awake—but then Jesus expects us to stay awake even though he can’t tell
us when he’s returning? Does Jesus expect us to stay figuratively awake all night long? And what does it even mean to stay figuratively awake?

Like I said before, Jesus seems to intend to stir our hope in God, that God will send him back to earth to reconcile people and God.

Scott Russell Sanders aptly notes that the words ‘hope’ and ‘hop’ go back to the same root, one that means “‘to leap up in expectation.’ Isn’t that what it feels to be hopeful,” Sanders writes, “that buoyancy, that eagerness for what is to come?” In the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, we are told that hope is related to faith because both faith and hope yearn for something unseen, they both lean forward toward the tock. Hope then is an expectant leap of faith.

Jesus then isn’t just trying to convince us or ‘warn us to be watchful’ as most Bibles describe this passage. Jesus understands how dangerous it can be to cultivate hope in God. Jesus tries to goad us into taking part in the risky practice of hope. Jesus dares us to hope. Jesus dares us to put our ultimate hope in God.

II.

By daring us to hope, Jesus does not suggest that we can smugly calculate when the end will come or presume that we are God’s favorites. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that the term “rapture” never comes up in the Bible, and its association with Christian faith is due mainly to a nineteenth century Irish priest John Darby, who taught what is called “premillennial dispensation.” The idea he got in part from the book of Revelation was that there are seven ages in history and that we’re about to go from the age of grace to a violent age, and that in between the faithful people will get zapped up into heaven so that only the unfaithful will be left to contend with the upheaval to come. It was significant to Darby when this rapture would take place, so he calculated the day, confident that he and his followers would be among the 144,000 to be taken up to God. Darby’s ideological descendants include the writers of the Left Behind series and folks who have bumper stickers that read: “Warning: In case of rapture, the driver of this car will disappear.”

I respect my brothers and sisters in Christ, but I also see a couple of issues with this perspective. First, if Jesus compares himself to a thief in the night, then I would think that staying awake was a strategy to not be stolen away. But it would not be the one out of two who while in the field is taken away. Jesus never says being left behind is bad and being taken is good.

Secondly and more importantly, the whole enterprise of calculating when the tock will take place goes against everything Jesus says and goes against the basic practice of hope. Hope is an act of faith, relying on God and not your own aptitude. Jesus dares us to hope in the coming tock of God’s story and not to assume we know how and when it ends.

I think that the attempt to calculate the last day was and is a concealed expression of fear. Because when you think about it, taking Jesus’ words as literally as possible here is pretty scary. A repeat of the flood? Friends out in the field and one is taken away? That sounds traumatic for both the one taken and the one left behind. Traumatic because it’s clear that God is in control in the situation. Those who try to interpret Jesus’ words like Darby have ample reason to want to feel some measure of control by knowing when it might happen and to rest assured that they’ll come out on the saved side.

I mean, we all want control over the end of our lives. Just yesterday on public radio, children’s author Judith Viorst was interviewed about turning eighty. She said that she used to just wish that she wouldn’t outlive her husband. But now, she says, she also doesn’t want her husband to outlive her because he could get remarried and the new wife might redecorate the house. Viorst has decided that somehow without suicide playing a part, she and her husband really need to die at the same time, like at the end of the movie The Notebook. Viorst said this all tongue-in-cheek, but we all know that she’s also being perfectly honest. We all want to control the end of our lives as much as possible because the end scares us. But Jesus calls us not to calculate or to try to control, but instead to hope in God’s saving activity.

III.
In daring us to hope in God’s actions, Jesus also dares us not to despair. While Jesus emphasizes that the hour of the Son’s coming will be unexpected, he also emphasizes that it will come, that tick will lead to tock.

This is especially relevant to us as Christians now that we can measure the intervening time between Christ’s time and ours not by years or decades but by millennia. That increasingly wide lapse of time makes hope more and more clearly a matter of perseverance, of maintaining hope each and every day.

Victor Frankl was an Austrian Jewish psychiatrist who during World War II was imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps for three years. During his imprisonment, his unofficial job became to make sure fellow prisoners didn’t commit suicide. While he became good at anticipating others’ suicidal tendencies, he couldn’t stop people from losing hope. When a prisoner gave up hope entirely, Frankl wrote, they would smoke their last cigarettes, “refuse to get out of bed, and…usually within a day…would die,” Death by hope deprivation.

Tom Long on the other hand retells another concentration camp story, when a young boy, Hugo, witnessed his father take their ration of butter, dip a string in it and light the string as a shabat candle. Hugo angrily asked his father why he’d waste their butter. “His father said, ‘Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live a minute without hope.’”

In our choice between hope and despair, hope requires so much more tenacity and faith. Hoping as an act of perseverance really is like staying up all night. But Jesus dares us nevertheless to hope in God.

Scott Russell Sanders describes a Quaker he knew “who visited prisoners in county jail, week in and week out, for decades. Mainly he just offered himself…he didn’t ask whether the prisoners were innocent or guilty…he didn’t preach to them, didn’t pick between the likeable and nasty…nor did he call attention to his kindness…. Why did he go spend time with outcasts…when he could have been golfing of shopping or watching TV? ‘I go’ [he said] ‘in case everyone else has given up on them. I never give up.’” Here is Christian hope in the face of every cultural excuse to despair.

IV.

Jesus dares us to hope in his resurrection; Jesus dares us to hope in God’s final saving actions at the end of our lives and at the end of history. When people try to figure out a way to control God or the future and when give up on God and the future, Jesus dares us as the church to be minions of hope, to practice our hope in tangible ways, to not give up now and not give up hope, even when our recent past has been filled with more discouragement than encouragement. At funerals, for example, the pastor proclaims good news, but it’s people in the pews who can reinforce to a family that in addition to their memories of a loved one, those who grieve can grasp onto Christian hope.

When people get bogged down in what they feel is the incessant tick, tick, tick of their lives, Christian minions of hope can point to the tock promised by Jesus and explain that the End does change all, that Jesus coming as a little baby foreshadows Jesus coming at the end and that despite any feelings of alienation we have, God has not left us behind. We remember during Advent that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us not just 2,000 years ago, not just today, but even to the end of the age.

Jesus dares us to hope in God now, while the clock is ticking, to hope in God through Jesus Christ who has come, is coming this season and will come at the tock of history to catch those who leap in hope. Amen.

---

i Thomas G. Long, From Memory to Hope, page 127.
ii Scott Russell Sanders, Hunting for Hope, page 20.
v Viktor M. Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, page 82, quoted in Sanders, pages 18-19.
vi Long, page 132.
vii Sanders, page 84.