

December 2, 2012
It's a Wonderful Life

Endure It
Matthew 24:36-44

Opening words:

One of the customs of the Christmas season is the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. It is considered to be one of the most inspirational and best loved movies in American cinema. This Frank Capra directed and produced film was released in 1946 but is viewed by many annually. It stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. The film was based on Philip Van Doren Stern's book, *The Greatest Gift*. *It's a Wonderful Life* is part of the tapestry of Christmas. This year I am using that traditional Christmas movie as the backdrop for my 2012 Advent/ Christmas sermon series

Today, we begin a new liturgical year. This is the first Sunday of Advent. This liturgical season can be traced back to the fourth century. Originally, special worship services were held throughout the week. In the year 650 the church in Spain began to talk about the Sundays of Advent. At that time there were five Sundays. It was Pope Gregory VII (1073-85), who shortened the season to four Sundays. The word "Advent" means "coming". We remember the way Jesus came the first time, but we also remember that some day Jesus will return. It is Christ's return that we want to look at today. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew 24:36-44. Let me call this message *It's a Wonderful Life: Endure It*.

Matthew 24:36-44

36 "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. 42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

History tells us Sir Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922) was a polar explorer. Once while on a South Pole expedition, he left a few men on Elephant Island, promising that he would return. Later, when he tried to go back, huge icebergs blocked the way. But suddenly, as if by a miracle, an avenue opened in the ice and Shackleton was able to get through. His men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard. No sooner had the ship cleared the island than the ice crashed together behind them.

Contemplating their narrow escape, the explorer said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go!" They replied, "We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'The boss may come today.'"

Do you believe someday the boss will return? Do you believe that someday Jesus will come again? If you have ever pondered the second coming of Christ then say, **"Amen!"**

Did you know there are approximately 11 million websites on this topic? I haven't looked at each one but they cover a wide range of opinions. Few topics are more controversial than the second coming of Christ. If you don't believe me then bring it up among your friends. Generally, people divide themselves into three different groups. Which one of these groups do you belong?

The first group believes it will never happen. They are the same group that dismiss the resurrection of Jesus. They simply dismiss the second coming because they believe it is nothing more than an old wives tale. In their opinion, it resonated to an uneducated society but it has nothing to offer to our sophisticated educated world. It is like the stories of the Paul Bunyan or the Tooth Fairy. It is just a tale to be told. Do you know of anyone who simply dismisses the second coming of Christ?

The second group believes the second coming has already happened. This comes from the academic world. They believe Christ returned during that great day of Pentecost. You remember the story. The Holy Spirit swept through the world without warning. The believers and the non-believers were divided. The believers were touched by this divine power and were united with God. They formed this new organization called the church and began to spread the Good News. The non-believers, on the other hand, remained untouched. Do you know of anyone who believes the second coming has already occurred?

The third group is still waiting for Jesus to come. Regularly, they study the signs of the end that are scattered throughout the Bible. Some believe there are as many as 26 different signs of the end. For them, every current event signals our demise. Every war, famine or earthquake is a sign of the apocalypse. The problem is, our world is filled with so many wars, famines and earthquakes. It is like trying to read a street sign through a thick fog. There is something there but you can't make it out. Can anyone read the signs? People have been trying to make out the signs for a long time.

In the nineteenth century there was an evangelist by the name of William Miller. He studied the signs and believed that Jesus would return on April 3, 1843. All over the Northeast, half million of his followers called Adventists, waited for that day. Journalists had a field day. Reportedly some disciples were on mountaintops, hoping for a head start to heaven. Others were in graveyards, planning to ascend in union with their departed loved ones.

Some high society ladies clustered together outside town to avoid entering God's holy kingdom amid the common herd. You know what happened. April 3, 1843 came and went. Jesus didn't return and time moved forward. What do you believe about the second coming of Christ? If this makes you think say, "**Amen!**" I believe someday Jesus will return. However, I don't worry about the signs. I just trust Jesus.

This morning we find ourselves in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew. The topic is the second coming of Christ. I would encourage you to put all your opinions aside and just listen to Jesus. The Master said his second coming is one the greatest secrets in the history of the world. Verse 36 says, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" If there is one verse that everyone should memorize about the second coming it is that one. Only God knows when Jesus will return. Hollywood does not know when Jesus will return. The History Channel does not know when Jesus will return. That strange person in your life, who is always looking for signs of the end, does not know when Jesus will return. The Bible says nothing about the Mayan calendar or Rasputin. However, the Bible does say the second coming is a secret. The Bible does say Jesus will come without warning.

Today, I don't want to talk about signs. I want to talk about the secret. This great secret is the ultimate challenge. Because the second coming is a secret, it means you always have to be prepared. You have to live every day like it is your last one. Jesus can return at any time without warning. If Jesus returns today, are you ready, or do you have some work to do? Does anyone here need some self-improvement? Are there things you would still like to do? Are there things you would still like to accomplish? Does anyone here need to work on some relationship in your life? Do you respect everyone? Is there someone in your life you wish would disappear? When was the last time you told your children you love them? Does anyone here still need to work on your relationship with God? Are you still mad at God over a disappointment or a loss? Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior? I would encourage you to fix these things now. After all, Jesus could return at any time. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Personally

One of the shows I have been watching History Channel's series, *The Men Who Built America*. If you have been looking at the series you know they are examining the lives of John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford and JP Morgan. Each story is fascinating, but it was Henry Ford's life that really caught my attention. Did you know Henry Ford was born on a farm outside of Detroit? It was his father's dream for Henry to take over the farm, but he had different ideas. At the age of 16, Henry left the farm and began as a machinist's apprentice. Then he went to work for the Edison Illuminating Company. In time, he was their chief engineer. The whole time he was working he was saving his money so he could pursue his real dream, developing a car the common man could afford. He and a partner founded the Ford Motor Company with this in mind. When he introduced the assembly line to his plant, his dream became a reality. The Model T became an instant success. Did you know half of all cars on American roads in 1918 were made by Ford?

I think his story is fascinating on many levels. However, what I admire most about Ford is that his dream became a reality. Have all your dreams reached reality?

If Jesus were to return today, what regrets do you have personally? What dreams do you still have that haunt you daily? The return of Christ signals the end. It means the end of my personal aspirations. What do you still want to do with your life? What books would you still like to read? What places do you still want to travel? What hobbies do you still want to explore? What causes do you still want to aid? What people do you still want to meet? The second coming of Christ signals the end! However, he still hasn't come so you still have time to live out your personal dreams. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Socially

One of my favorite Christmas movies is Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. If you are like me then you have seen it countless times. You know the storyline. George Bailey is a young man with dreams. He wants to see the world, but his responsibilities keep getting in the way. He is trapped in his hometown of Bedford Falls and shackled to the family business, the Bailey Building and Loan. He is living a disillusioned life when matters get worse. The bank examiner comes to town and discovers the business is short \$8000! (You have to factor inflation into the story!) George looks everywhere for the money but he can't find it. Then the unexpected happens. The people, who George had known and helped for years, step forward and give him the needed funds. He wasn't the richest man in town because he had money. He was the richest man in town because of his relationships.

If Jesus would return today, what regrets do you have socially? Is there anyone in your life you have spoken to in years? Is there anyone in your life who doesn't deserve a second chance? Is there anyone in your life you hate? Is there anyone in your life you don't trust? George Bailey was guilty of not believing in the people in his life. How guilty are you of selling the people in your life short? What joys are you withholding from yourself because you have cut someone out of our life? The second coming of Christ signals the end! However, he hasn't come yet, so you still have time improve your relationships. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Spiritually

According to a 2011 Ipsos Research Institute 51% of the world's population believes in the existence of God. They surveyed 18,000 people from 23 different countries. I don't know if that fact makes me feel better or worse. That is one of those facts that really doesn't matter. Believing in the existence of God is not enough. Even Satan believes in the existence of God and he is not going to heaven. Believing in the historical Jesus doesn't really matter. The only thing that really matters is that you have accepted Him as your Lord and Savior. If you have accepted Jesus, you go to heaven. If you haven't accepted Jesus then you go to hell.

If Jesus would return today, what regrets do you have spiritually? In other words, do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? The second coming of Christ signals the end! However, he hasn't come yet so you still have time to accept Jesus. You still have time to grab that ticket that leads to eternal life. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

At the height of World War II, Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for taking a stand against Hitler. Yet, he continued to urge fellow believers to resist Nazi tyranny. A group of Christians, believing that Hitler was the Antichrist, asked Bonhoeffer, "Why do you expose yourself to all this danger? Jesus will return any day, and all your work and suffering will be for nothing." Bonhoeffer replied, *"If Jesus returns tomorrow, then tomorrow I'll rest from my labor. But today I have work to do. I must continue the struggle until it's finished."*

Someday Christ will return! The question that has haunted the ages is, "When?" It is the greatest secret in the history of the world. Only God knows the answer. The angels in heaven do not know the answer. The Son does not know the answer. The entertainment world does not know the answer. Pastors and evangelists do not know the answer. Only God knows the answer. However, we do know the second coming of Christ signals the end. However, he has not come yet so you still have time to make some improvements. You still have time to live out your personal dreams. You still have time to fix those broken relationships. You still have time to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. C.S. Lewis says: *"A Christian is not one who never goes wrong, but one who is enabled to repent and begin over again after each stumble—because of the inner working of Christ."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**