

Church Can Happen ...

ANYTIME
Matthew 24:36-44

Our Advent Series is called “Church Can Happen Anywhere.” The title comes from a United Methodist ad campaign that’s aimed at getting us to go beyond the walls of the church and make a difference in the world. “Church Can Happen Anywhere” is a call to become a *missional* church, a church that’s focused outward.

You say, “What’s that got to do with Christmas?” I say that’s the true meaning of Christmas. After all, Christmas is the story of how the Son of God went on a mission trip! He left his home in heaven in order to reach out to us.

Some Christians seem to feel like church is *in here*, the world is *out there*, and the purpose of being *in here* is to stay away from what’s *out there*. Christmas turns that idea on its head. Christmas tells how Jesus was *up there*, and he came *down here* to save the world. And now, if he’s *in here* (in your heart), he moves us to go *out there* and make a difference!

And when we do that, church can happen anywhere.

Think about this: The whole Christmas story is about missions and outreach. You have Mary and Joseph who were poor and homeless. You have the Wise Men who were foreigners. You have the Shepherds—after they saw Jesus, the first thing they did was go out and spread the message.

When we reflect on the Baby in the Manger and why he came, that should lead us to move outward to the world he came to save.

And when we do that, church can happen anywhere.

Church can happen anywhere – and church can also happen ANYTIME. That’s the key word for today—**anytime**.

You may not realize that one of the goals of Advent is getting ready for the second coming of Christ. The word *Advent* means “coming.” At Advent we remember that the one who came as a baby in a manger will come again as a king in glory

And when’s that going to happen? ANYTIME.

Americans are absolutely fascinated with the end of the world.

We have movies like *2012*,
The Road,
Armageddon,
Terminator 2: Judgment Day.

There are over 400 movies about the end of the world!

59% of Americans are convinced that the end of the world, or at least the beginning of it, will happen during their lifetimes.

We're fascinated with this subject. I would bet that most of you have read at least one of the *Left Behind* novels. That series sold over 65 million copies worldwide!

A lot of the best-selling Christian books are about the end of the world. A lot of the most watched Christian TV shows are about the end of the world.

And we're always asking questions:

- When's it going to be?
- How's it going to happen?
- Where's it going to start?
- Who's going to set it off?

Lots of questions, lots of theories, lots of debate, lots of websites and seminars and books, lots of very complicated charts with complicated timelines...

Let me ask you something: Is this really what Jesus wants us to be doing?

- Is this *really* how Jesus wants us to spend our time?
- Is this *really* how Jesus wants us to spend our money?

When it comes to the end of the world, what you need to know is really not complicated. In Matthew 24, Jesus tells us THREE THINGS WE NEED TO KNOW about his second advent and the end of the world:

#1 – Matthew 24, verses 23-27

²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'There he is!'—do not believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ Take note, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look! He is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look! He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

--Matthew 24:23-27 NRSV

First thing to see: When Jesus comes back, it will be unmistakable.

- It's not going to be a secret
- There's not going to be any confusion.

Now, what Jesus predicted about false messiahs has come true:

- David Koresh
- Sun Myung Moon

- A guy in the Philippines who says he's the second coming of Christ
- A guy in England who says he's the second coming of Christ

But Jesus is not going to come back like that. Look at verse 30:

³⁰ *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory.*

We are talking about a cataclysmic apocalyptic event—not a hidden mystery—but the end of the world as we know it. As CS Lewis said, *"When the author walks onto the stage, the play is over."*

For the second thing, look at verse 36

³⁶ *"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."*

Now, how much clearer can that be? What does it say? "About that day or hour NO ONE KNOWS."

So, here's the second thing: When Jesus comes back, it will be unexpected

And yet, throughout history, people have been ignoring this clear teaching and setting dates anyway!

In the 1800s, a preacher named William Miller predicted that Christ would return between March 21, 1842 – March 21, 1843. When it didn't happen, he re-set date for some time between October 20-22, 1844. Miller got together a group of 200 or so people. They sold their possessions, put on white robes, gathered together and waited. You and I can only imagine their embarrassment when October 22 came and went and they were still sitting there.

We think people today might not be so crazy, but we were hearing the same kind of reports back in the 80s when Edgar C. Whisenant mailed out a book called *88 Reasons the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. People started selling their possessions. One lady had her dog put to sleep. A Christian TV station played taped messages telling the people left behind what to do.

And then of course just a few years ago, Harold Camping and the Family Radio Ministry said the world would end on May 21, 2011. They spent 5 million dollars on billboards announcing the date. When it didn't happen, Harold Camping reset the date for October 21. When that didn't happen, Camping, much to his credit, issued a statement saying that his efforts to predict a date were "sinful" (his words) and that he should have listened to Matthew 24:36 – *"But about that day and hour no one knows..."*

And that leads to the third thing: It could happen ANYTIME.

⁴² *Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.* ⁴³ *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.*

⁴⁴ *Therefore you also must be ready...*
--Matthew 24:42-44a

When Jesus talks about the end of the world, the bulk of his teaching is on this theme of GETTING READY.

And in Matthew 25, he tells us exactly HOW he wants us to get ready. In fact, he spends an entire chapter on this theme. He tells three stories about getting ready:

1- The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13):

Jesus says there were ten bridesmaids who were waiting for the bridegroom to come during the night. Each one had an oil lamp that she would light when the bridegroom came. Five of the bridesmaids did not bring enough oil. They asked the other five if they could borrow some oil, but those said, “No, there’s not enough for us and you. Go buy some more oil.” But the stores were closed (because it wasn’t Black Friday, when they’re open all night) and the five foolish bridesmaids could not buy any oil. And when the groom showed up, those five were not allowed into the feast.

What this story means is this: ***You can’t buy faith from somebody else.*** Now is the time to enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Now is the time to grow your faith. Now is the time to fill your lamp with oil (faith), so that when he comes back, you will be identified as an invited guest because your lamp burns with love for the bridegroom.

So let me ask you: *Have you made a personal decision to enter into a living relationship with Jesus Christ? Or are you trying to buy faith from somebody else, like your mother, your father, your grandparents, or whoever?*

2- The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30):

Jesus says that a man went away on a trip. He called his servants together, and gave them talents (a unit of money). He gave five talents to one, two to the next, and one talent to the third. When the man returned, he called his servants together to give an account of what they did with their talents. The servant who got five talents had invested well and doubled the master’s money. The master said, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” The servant who had two talents also invested well and doubled the master’s money—and like the first one, he heard the master say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” But the third servant—the one who had one talent—buried his money in the ground and did nothing with it. To him the master said, “You wicked and lazy servant!”

So, between now and the time when Jesus comes back, ***what are you doing with your life?*** What are you doing with your talents? How are you using what you have, whatever you have, to expand the master's kingdom?

And when Jesus comes back, will you hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant?" Or will you realize too late that you have wasted your life?

3-The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46):

And then, in verses 31-46, Jesus tells the most haunting story of all. It's a picture of Judgment Day, when Jesus comes again in his glory. He separates the nations like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. To those on his right hand he says, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcome me. I was without clothes, and you gave me something to wear. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me." And those folks respond, "We never saw you in any of those situations!" And Jesus says, "Whatever you did for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me."

And then Jesus turns to the people on his left, and says, "I was hungry and you let me starve. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing. I was a stranger and you left me out in the cold. I need clothes and you didn't care. I was sick and you ignored me. I was in prison and you said I deserved what I got and then forgot about me." And those folks say, "Lord! When did we ever see you..." And Jesus says, "Whatever you did NOT do for the least of these, you did not do for me."

So I have to ask you: ***What are you doing for the least, the last, and the lost?*** Because if you love Jesus, *that's* what you should be focusing on!

If you want to be ready for the end of the world, then put down your charts and maps and books and timelines and predictions about and go serve the least of these.

If you love Jesus, go serve the least of these. Because Jesus loves the poor and the hurting so much that he says, "I am them." And when he comes back to judge the living and the dead, this is going to be a major item on his agenda: "*What did you do for the least of these?*"

And when we go out beyond the walls of the church to serve the least of these, *church can happen anywhere:*

- When we feed the homeless at Bethesda Center, or Rupert Bell Park, *church can happen anywhere.*
- When we provide clean water to developing nations, where dirty water kills more people than anything, *church can happen anywhere.*

- When we welcome Hispanic children who need tutoring to the Open Arms Community House in Winston-Salem, *church can happen anywhere.*
- When we provide winter coats for children who need them, *church can happen anywhere.*
- When a 2-year-old in our church has a birthday party, and her mom asks that the guests bring gifts for sick babies, *church can happen anywhere.*
- When a bunch of Main Street folks go over to Forsyth Prison to hold a worship service on a Sunday night, *church can happen anywhere.*

And here's the thing: Church *needs* to happen anywhere, because the second coming could happen ANYTIME.