

“What Time Is It?”

Matthew 24:36, 44

Romans 13:11-14

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December 23, 2007

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I have a confession to make. Way back in late September, just one week before I was due to interview here, I came to Dallas for a sneak preview. I was in town anyway with my youth group to attend a Dave Matthews Concert, so I couldn't resist the chance to peek at the church before I came for the real deal.

It was a typical warm late summer evening. The sun was low on the horizon. It was that perfect time just before twilight, when you have the hope that maybe tonight it will cool off. The light is just right, slanting yellow and gold. Riding along Northwest Highway in my cousin's car, I spotted a church. I could see this was a substantial church. The church campus stretched for blocks and blocks. Not a parking lot in sight. The lawn immaculately manicured a carpet of lush well-watered green. Even the children's playground was impressive. It looked like a castle.

Later I came to find out it was the Park Cities Baptist Church. A big steeple church at the heart of what I am told is a big steeple city. This part of the city (as you well know) glitters and pulses with commerce. You have businesses and retail stores I have only seen on the internet. And the cars. Cars you don't often see in Arkansas. Mercedes, well sometimes you see those, but Rolls Royce? Never. Expensive cars move along, cocooned against heat and smog and noise.

But the church steeple is what caught my eye. The church steeple rises high above all that surrounds. Massive white stone. A large clock face sits on each side of the tower.

Then, almost as an afterthought, I spotted something beneath those giant clock hands. Many of you have probably seen it. There is something written on the clock face in small black script. It is something you might not expect. Tempus fugit? No. Peace on Earth? No. Our God Reigns? No. The phrase, “Night Cometh” unnerved me.

Of all the things they might have put up there. I wonder. “Night Cometh”? How many worshippers notice these words? How many business people, rushing down Northwest Highway, pause to look up to see these words? “Night Cometh”. To see this you have to be looking. Really crane your neck.

“Night Cometh”. It gives us all pause. It is unnerving. We want so much to rush into the LIGHT and joy, we pay little attention to the night. Like our reading from Matthew today, “No one knows about the day or the hour---not even the angels in heaven”. It is a fearsome thought, one we’d rather avoid.

How often do we ever think about such things? About the end of our life? Certainly not **NOW** on the Eve of Christmas Eve. Much goes on just outside our awareness, just above our heads, deep within the workings of God in our time, **but we are oblivious**. We cruise through life, pausing only to glance at our watches, chat on our cell phones, check off the next thing on our Christmas lists that are way too long. We act as if the night will last forever, and we go on doing the things we wish we would not do. We act as though we have unlimited time.

And yet, we can’t deny it, there are those moments when we are struck hard, when it takes our breath away, when we realize, sometimes with a sense of dread, “Night cometh”.

You know the feeling of night coming. A terrible accident, an untimely diagnosis, a young life that ends too soon. . .

A few weeks ago, at the very beginning of Advent, Night came for football player Sean Taylor in the form of an intruder in the night. A single gunshot to the leg, and the life pulsed out of Sean swiftly, quietly. Sean was living the dream, a star player in the NFL. “It is with deep regret that a young man had to come to his end so soon”, his father said in a statement on behalf of the family.¹

On December 5, night came again, as it so relentlessly will, to a shopping mall in Omaha, Nebraska. Nine people dead, five women, four men. Six of them worked there; two were no doubt making their lists and checking them twice. One, a desperate teenage boy.

Night cometh. A thief in the night, snuffing out the light of life in a powerful young athlete. A troubled teen, with nowhere to turn and no one to turn to, desperate unto death.

I mourn for Sean Taylor’s family, for his little girl who will never remember her father. I mourn for the victims of the shooting in Nebraska, and I mourn for the shooter. I mourn for the thief in the

¹ From article in Arkansas Democrat Gazette, 11/28/07, from the Associated Press, “Redskins Star Safety Dies at 24”.

night. And I mourn for us, for our society that seems to thrive on violence.

What time is it? The world says it is time to fear the night, time to hunker down, lock our doors, build up our ammunitions, close in on ourselves in our age of anxiety.

The world says this, but **WE KNOW SOMETHING DIFFERENT**. The Advent of God into our world says something completely different. Swords and guns become garden tools; never again will the children---the children---learn war.

“What time is it?” Paul asks. “What time is it?” Matthew echoes. It is the question we ask ourselves as shadows lengthen, as the bad news of the world seems to outweigh the good, as on the Eve of Christmas Eve, once again we consider something so incredible---*the in-breaking of God* into our world.

As we stand on the brink of Christmas, we ask, what time is it? Paul asks not in the usual way we ask, squeezing in a few more errands before the stores close. Paul’s question of time has nothing to do with clocks. Paul’s question is about a special moment, a season of preparation, an attitude of the heart. “The hour has come”, Paul says. “It’s almost time”, so we had better get ready.

Paul asks us to embrace a Christian sense of time, a kairos moment. Kairos, when everything comes together in just the right way. An auspicious time, steeped in mystery, when the rules are all broken and the stars converge. Now, we are to embrace kairos with particular urgency.

The Christmas message says “Wake up!” to the shepherds AND to us. “Wake up! It is time!” And what we are to do, in this special time, is simple. What we are to do, is Love. We are to go and find the One who is Love. Christ is near, so we bend toward the light and warmth of Love.

What time is it? It is time to fear or is it time to love? It is so easy to fear, to focus on the night that cometh, so easy to believe only in the night, the night that knocks at our door with such persistence.

But the Advent of God knocks, no RINGS OUT, to a different beat. The Light is near. The Light is not only near, the Light is here.

Are we motivated by the fear of the night, or are we emboldened by the Love of the Light? Are we more focused on the “thou shalt not” or do we resonate with “come and abide in me”?

I think Sean Taylor did not fear the Night. He embraced the Day. During his last known interview, he spoke of the joy he felt when he made his daughter laugh, how he wanted to give her life experiences different from his own, and how he did not fear death. “You can’t be scared of death, he said. When the time comes, it comes. . .I’ve been blessed. God’s looked out for me, so, I’m happy.”² Unusual, isn’t it, to hear such things out of the mouth of a 24 year old athlete?

Things are bleak out there (we cannot deny it), but they’re not as bleak as they might have been, because not only is Christ coming, but the Light of the world has already arrived.

Soon in our worship we will sing “Rejoice, rejoice believers, and let your lights appear, the evening is advancing, and darker night is near.” The words ring out to us from the 17th century.

We abide the night, because we know Christ has already arrived, and will come again and again! We wait in hope and with great expectation, because we know the Light of Love comes to us whenever we look for Him. “Arise, O Son so longed for, over this shadowed sphere of earth”, we sing as we embrace the Light of Love.

The Advent of God turns night into something to be loved, not something to be feared. We embrace it because the passing of the night always leads to the light of day. It is the light of God’s day we so long for, we so need, and in which we can indeed rejoice.

² Ibid.