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Knowing How It Ends

Matthew 24:36-44

There is an African-American congregation which has had a very significant ministry for many years in a blighted neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. The area around the church includes blocks of burned out buildings, boarded up storefronts, and places where prostitutes and crack dealers ply their trades. Most local congregations long ago gave up on that area and moved away. But this church has decided to stay and has committed itself to addressing the desperate human needs which are so near at hand. They created a locally-owned bank in this neighborhood that did not have one before. They set up latch key programs for children. They organized neighborhood redevelopment agencies. They set up Bible studies in high rises. All of these programs have helped people but they have not changed the essential character of the neighborhood.

A newspaper reporter once interviewed the pastor of the church.

He said, "Sure, you're doing great stuff. But it's hard to see what difference any of that is making. What enables you and your fold to keep going?" The pastor said, "We've read the Bible, and we know how it ends. We aren't there yet," he went on, "but we know how it ends, and that makes all the difference (Theodore J. Wardlow, Journal for Preachers, Advent 2007, page 4)."

This is the point that Matthew conveys to the early church in the 24th chapter of his gospel. Matthew is writing to people who are anxious about the state of the world. They are ridiculed by their theological opponents because God's work of salvation through Christ has not yet been completed. The world is full of unsolvable problems. There is so much that is still broken and unredeemed. The early Christians were looking for Jesus to come again and resolve all these issues. When that did not happen their credibility came under attack.

Matthew invites these anxiety ridden believers to make peace with their uncertainty. They do not need to know the details of how God's purposes will be fulfilled. Nor do they need to know the day when the Lord is coming. It is enough to know that God through Christ has broken through time and changed everything. They are to stay alert to what God is doing in the world, not because they know the time-table but because they know what it means. They have read the Bible and they know how it ends.

Paul issues the same challenge in Romans 13. Paul is also writing to early Christians who are anxious because their church is caught in a crisis of survival. Paul wants his people to look at this crisis from a different perspective. The coming of Christ into the world has introduced a new way of understanding time. They are no longer living in the time the Greeks call "chronos". It is no longer about chronology which tracks when things happen. They don't need to know that anymore. Because of Christ they are now living in the kind of time the Greeks call "kairos". This is the time of opportunity when everything is new. This is the time when God' saving activity can no longer be resisted. The calendar doesn't matter any more. And neither does the persecution which is directed

toward their church. What matters is that God's grace has been unleashed in the world and the world will never be the same. They have read their Bibles and they know how it ends.

Knowing how it ends gives our lives purpose and direction in the midst of the uncertainties that confront us on a daily basis. In Nathaniel Philbrick's book, *Mayflower*, he tells the story of a people who learned to live with great uncertainty. The 102 passengers who made that journey were crowded into a cramped section of the ship in which the ceiling was only five feet above the floor. For sixty-five days at sea they had very little privacy. Since about half of the passengers were members of a close knit Puritan separatist community and the other half were strangers who came in pursuit of fame and fortune, it was anybody's guess whether this diverse group could stick together long enough to survive in the new world. All the passengers knew for certain was if they were lucky enough to survive the 3,000 mile journey across the ocean, no one would be there to greet them except perhaps some hostile Indians. They knew absolutely nothing about their ultimate destination (Philbrick, *Mayflower*, page 30).

Half of the *Mayflower's* passengers were convinced that God was at the center of their journey. They believed that God was leading them into a new world where their spiritual vision would flourish and their brokenness could be healed. They did not have a time-table for how God's salvation would unfold. But they had read their Bibles and they knew how it ends. They believed that God's will could not be blocked. That conviction empowered them to travel in peace.

The *Mayflower's* crossing of the Atlantic serves as a metaphor for the spiritual journey of these people of faith. A succession of westerly gales created serious challenges for the captain of the ship. Several times during the voyage storms were so severe the captain had to "lie ahull," which meant letting the ship drift with the storm which was blowing toward the east, and giving up hard won miles. The journey would be extended for additional days as they rode out the storm and regained the lost miles later. These were times when their faith was sorely tested.

In 1957 a replica of the *Mayflower* was constructed in England and christened the *Mayflower II*. It retraced the original journey across the Atlantic. Toward the end of the voyage a storm set in which forced the captain of the *Mayflower II* to do the same thing that the captain of the original ship had done 337 years before. The captain of the *Mayflower II* was extremely anxious because no one had tried that maneuver in a Jacobean era ship for more than 200 years. Philbrick described what happened next in these words:

As soon as the ship's bow swung into the wind, a remarkable change came over the *Mayflower II*. Even though she was under bare poles in a howling gale, her slab-like topsides functioned as a kind of wooden storm sail, magically steadying the ship's motion. Almost perfectly balanced, the *Mayflower II* sat like a contented duck amid the uproar of the storm. After being pounded unmercifully by waves, the ship was finally at peace (*Mayflower*, page 32).

The Pilgrims knew peace in the midst of the storm. It can be the same for us. We have read our Bibles and we know how it ends. We know that it ends with God.