

Don't say when: Expecting the Second Coming

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

*But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. . . . Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.* (Matt. 24:36, 44)

Years and years ago, way back in the early 1970s, I had a vision of the end time. It was probably no coincidence that the world itself was looking pretty terminal at that point. John and Bobby Kennedy had both been buried by then, along with Martin Luther King Jr. Boys I knew were so afraid of being drafted for Vietnam that their hands shook when they dialed the combinations on their mailboxes at the campus post office. Meanwhile, the rest of us were making all the noise we could, taking over administration buildings and marching in the streets. A girl our age had been shot dead by National Guardsmen during a protest at Kent State. We had all seen the picture.

One night in the middle of all this there was a terrific thunderstorm. I lay on the bed in my dorm room watching the sky light up with blast after blast of raw electricity. Even though it was way past midnight, the sky was luminous, with all the nightlights of Atlanta hitting the low clouds and thudding back down again. The color was greenish brown—not a right color for the sky to be, which made me feel a little queasy inside.

I could not sleep. I had not slept well in weeks. I did not know what I wanted to be when I grew up. I did not even know if I *wanted* to grow up in such a violent, crazy world. Then I heard myself say, “Come, Lord Jesus”—just like that—and then I said it again: “Come, Lord Jesus.” I remember thinking I should be afraid to say something like that, but I wasn’t. I was relieved to go ahead and ask for the end. *Please come back and finish this thing up. We are no good at it. We have never been any good at it. Come, Lord Jesus, and don’t delay.*

Then I looked out the window and saw (imagined?) a bright spot in the sky that grew bigger and bigger, with clouds boiling all around the center of it like big curling waves. Then the head of a beautiful white horse pushed through them, then the

front legs, then the chest, until finally this gleaming creature was galloping right toward me with a rider on its back who was too bright for me to see. There was a lot going on in the background too, like the wake behind a giant speedboat, but I never got a good look at that because I could not take my eyes off the horse and rider.

It lasted only for a second or two. Then I stopped imagining (seeing?) and the thunderstorm moved on. I fell asleep, survived college, grew up, got a job—but that vision of the end remains vivid for me. It is embarrassingly literal, I know. In my part of the country, it might be called a vision of the rapture, and there are plenty of people who would be happy to tell me exactly where it comes in the final lineup of events.

They do not get their information from the Bible, however. Whether they know it or not, they owe most of their eschatology to a renegade Anglican priest from Ireland named John Nelson Darby, who spent a large part of the 19th century preaching something called “premillennial dispensationalism.” According to Darby, human history is divided up into seven ages, or “dispensations,” all leading up to the end of time. We live under the “dispensation of grace,” when people are judged according to their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but between now and the “dispensation of the millennial kingdom,” things are going to get ugly.

There is going to be a Great Tribulation, which those whom Jesus recognizes as his own will not have to endure. God will remove the elect by means of the rapture before judging the earth. Then Israel will be restored, according to Darby, as God’s primary instrument in history, the wicked will be destroyed in the final battle of Armageddon, and Christ will begin a 1,000-year reign on earth.

Even I, who am not one of Darby’s followers, was surprised to learn that the word “rapture” never occurs in the Bible, but at least one curious side effect of his scenario has been the political alliance between Christian evangelicals in this country and the Likud Party in Israel, both of whom—for their own reasons—want to see Israel, not Palestine, in charge of the Holy Land. Did you know that Israel bought Jerry Falwell a Lear jet in 1979, or that evangelical Christians gave almost \$5 million to the United Jewish Appeal in 1997?

The only reason I go over all of this is so that you know where it comes from. It comes from Darby and his followers, not from scripture, but since it answers a lot of questions that scripture doesn’t, it is very popular right now, especially among

people who do not like surprises. Some of these folks are *informed*. They know who will be saved and who will be lost. They know who the Antichrist is and where the Messiah will appear. These are the people who have bumperstickers on their cars that say, "Warning: In case of the rapture, the driver of this car will disappear." Lately I have been seeing some others that say, "When the rapture comes, can I have your car?"

Matthew might not have been quite that flip, but he definitely belonged to the second crowd. He was not concerned with reading signs and keeping timetables, at least partly because he knew how preoccupied people could get with those things. Before long they cared more about their calculations than they did about their neighbors. Once they had figured out who God's 144,000 elect were, they did not waste any time or courtesy on the damned, except perhaps to remind them just how hot hellfire was going to be. Meanwhile, God's chosen had plenty else to do: flee the cities, arm themselves against the enemy, purify themselves for their journey to heaven. Once they had gotten themselves all worked up about this, Matthew found it just about impossible to impress them with the fact that there were widows and orphans in the community going hungry because no one was signing up for the soup kitchen, or that there were still some people in jail who needed visiting, as well as some sick people at home who still needed looking after. But what did any of that matter, when the end was right around the corner?

Ironically, Matthew had the same problem with those who had *given up* looking for the end. They had stayed pretty focused for the first ten or 20 years, when there were still people around who had actually seen and heard Jesus, but once his disciples began to die off and the eyewitness reports about him became second- or thirdhand stories, people's ardor began to cool. If the stories were true, then where was he? If he was so full of love, then why hadn't he come back?

Things had never been worse in Palestine. The chosen people were scattered, the Temple was destroyed, the promised land was a province of Rome, and there was no relief in sight. "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place," Jesus said, but something had obviously gone wrong. Most of the generation that heard him say that *had* passed away, and the ones who were still alive had beards down to their knees. God's alarm clock must not have gone off. Or had God forgotten? A third possibility: there never was a God at all.

With questions like that in mind, Matthew made sure to include Jesus' disclaimer that even he did not know when the end would come. "No one knows," Jesus said, "not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (24:36). That left only one practical alternative, which served as Matthew's bottom line: "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (24:42). *If Jesus doesn't know when, then you sure don't know when, so why don't you stop obsessing about when and pay attention to what is happening around you right now?*

In a way, the 24th chapter of Matthew's Gospel reads like a three-act play about the end time. Starting with the first verse, each act lasts about 15 verses. Each contains a description of events still to come, and each ends with a renewed call to discipleship in the here and now. That makes Matthew a pretty good psychologist as well as an evangelist. He knows that while anxiety and apathy may look like two different disorders, they both respond to the same treatment, which is a focused assignment of some kind. So in each of his acts he describes a virtue that believers may practice whether the sun is falling out of the sky or not.

In act 1, the virtue is enduring love, in act 2 it is discernment, and in act 3 it is alertness, or mindfulness—the moment-by-moment willingness to stay awake to all that is. Any of you who have ever tried to meditate—or even to say the Lord's Prayer all the way through without letting your mind wander off—know how difficult this is. The present moment is just too slippery for most of us to hang on to. As hard as we try, we tend to slide off into what happened yesterday or what we have to do an hour from now, and whether our problem is preoccupation with the future or disillusionment with the past, the end result is that very few of us live our lives while they are actually happening to us. We are cut off from the present. God cannot get to us through all the layers of regret and expectation that we have swaddled ourselves in.

For instance, I am so mired in the past that I almost never meet anyone new. Or more to the point, I rarely give anyone a chance to be new. When someone I do not know walks up to me with a hungry look in her eyes, then I treat her like the last person I met who looked like that. This woman may have an entirely different story. She may be an angel of God sent to tell me something I desperately need to know, but I cannot even see her. All I can see is the last person whom she reminds me of, which means that this new person does not have a chance to get through to me.

I have a similar problem with the future, which is the closet where I store all my good intentions about the people in my life whom I am going to treat better one day real soon. I am not always going to be this busy and unfocused, I tell myself. Any moment now I am going to have time to do the things I have always meant to do and say the things I have always meant to say. I am going to be a better godparent. I am going to pray more. I am going to make my life count. In the meantime, this vision of the future gets me off the hook today. I can even fool myself into believing that my splendid intentions make me a better person right now, and that time will forever expand to meet my needs.

These are my own personal delusions, but they affect communities and nations as well. According to Matthew, it is time to wake up. No matter where Jesus is, it is time to stop living in the past and in the future and to start living right now, because whenever the end comes, that is when it will come—in the now—and meanwhile, our best chance at discovering what abundant life is all about is to start living into it right now, not only one by one but also all together.

I remember something one of my professors told me once, about how the second coming of Christ was an idea cooked up by some church father with only two fingers. The truth, he said, is that Christ comes again, and again, and again—that God has placed no limit on coming to the world, but is always on the way to us here and now. The only thing we are required to do is to notice—to watch, to keep our eyes peeled.

“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” How do you deal with a piece of advice like that? Well, why not be ready all the time, not only for the end but for whatever the moment brings? Every morning when you wake up, decide to live the life God has given you to live right now. Refuse to live yesterday over and over again. Resist the temptation to save your best self for tomorrow. Do not put off living the kind of life you meant to live. There is no time for that, no matter how much time is left.

Go ahead and make the decision, write the letter, get the help you need, find someone to love, give yourself away. Why waste your time making preparations for an end time you cannot predict? *Live* prepared. Live a caught-up life, not a put-off life, so that wherever you are—standing in a field or grinding at the mill, or just going about the everyday business of your life—you are ready for God, for whatever happens next, not afraid but wide awake, watching for the Lord who never tires of coming to the world.

Who knows? Ours may be the generation that finally sees him ride in on the clouds, or we may meet him the same way generations before us have—one by one by one, as we close our eyes for the last time. Either way, our lives are in God's hands. Either way, God leaves the living of them to us. To God be all honor and glory, now and forever.