

Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Clarence Jordan, who wrote the “cotton-patch” version of the scriptures, once visited an integrated church in the deep South. Jordan was surprised to find a large church so thoroughly integrated, not only black and white but also rich and poor. Jordan asked the old hillbilly preacher, “How did you get the church this way?” “What way?” the preacher asked. Jordan went on to explain his surprise at finding a church so integrated, and in the South, too. The preacher said, “Well, when our preacher left our small church, I went to the Deacons and said, ‘I’ll be the preacher.’ The first Sunday as preacher, I opened the Book and read, ‘As many of you as has been baptized into Jesus has put on Jesus and there is no longer any Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, males or females, because you is all one in Jesus.’

“Then I closed the Book and said, ‘If you one with Jesus, you one with all kind of folks. And if you ain’t, you ain’t.’” Jordan asked what happened after that. “Well,” the preacher said, “the Deacons took me into the back room and told me they didn’t want to hear that kind of preaching no more.” Jordan asked what he did. “I fired them Deacons,” the preacher roared. Then what happened, asked Jordan. “Well,” said the old hillbilly preacher, “I preached that church down to four. Not long after that, it grew and grew and grew. And I found out that revival sometimes don’t mean bringing people in but getting people out that don’t love Jesus.”

I’ve had that illustration in my files for quite some time and I have wondered when and how I would ever use it in a sermon. And then along came our scripture lesson from Matthew’s gospel; and, I was struck by the idea that the cataclysmic ending of the old world and the beginning of the new world, will take place when the Son of Man, Jesus, will come again *like a thief in the night*. Jesus didn’t say that God is a thief, or that he is a thief. Rather, he used an evocative metaphor for describing how the kingdom of God steals in among us. Like a thief in the night, the kingdom comes to us as a surprise, quite unexpectedly. And, I began to meditate on how Jesus comes to us like a thief in the night. Just as the old hillbilly preacher had to preach some folks out of the church in order for the church to gain more members, this “divine thief” comes to us to take away from us some things to which we cling so tightly, in order to give us more in life than we ever dreamed was possible.

Earlier, in this 24th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, the disciples had asked Jesus when would the end of the present age take place (with its turmoil and afflictions, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes) and what will be the sign of your coming? It becomes quite clear that the disciples had asked Jesus the wrong question. Their question (and our own questions, for that matter) shouldn’t focus on when is Jesus coming again, or whether it will be sooner or later. After all, if neither the angels of heaven know, nor Jesus the Son knows, but only God the Father, it’s sheer folly on Jesus’ disciples’ part to even try and speculate what the correct answer is. Instead, the right question that the disciples should have asked, but didn’t, should be concerned with *what are they to do in the meantime?*

That’s the real question that needs to be asked by Jesus’ disciples in every age. Given the fact that we really cannot know when our Lord is coming again - to bring an end to this present age of evil and suffering and to fulfill God’s righteous rule so that God’s will is finally and ultimately done here on earth as it is in heaven – we need to be asking instead, “How do we

faithfully live in this in-between time following Jesus' birth at Bethlehem and when he will return a second time to set matters right?"

The remainder of Jesus' answer, which is found in the scripture lesson from Matthew, is about those who are on "ready alert" and those who are not. Since Jesus will come like a thief in the night, we are to be prepared – like Noah and his family; or else, we will be tempted and lulled into indifference, perhaps even disbelief, forgetfulness, or neglect regarding Jesus' return – and then we will be like those who were swept away by the flood or who will be left behind in the field or while grinding grain into flour.

Jesus tells his disciples in every age to "Keep awake" for we do not know, cannot know, when our Lord is coming. Jesus' words serve as a wake-up call for us to keep doing what we are supposed to do or else there will be judgment. In fact, immediately after this section Jesus concluded his public ministry by telling parables about the faithful and unfaithful servants, the prepared and unprepared bridesmaids, the servants entrusted with talents, and the judgment of the nations as sheep and goats.

We are called to keep awake by waiting expectantly. This is not a passive, idle, "twiddling your thumbs" kind of waiting at all. Rather, we are urged to watch, pay attention to what God is doing around us, and continually stay busy by ministering to the hungry and thirsty folks, the strangers, the sick, and the imprisoned ones in our midst. We are called to do our part, which is to continue Jesus' ministry, until he comes again.

Some years ago, a remarkable woman was being interviewed on television. This lady managed, all by herself, to feed, clothe, and educate eight children in a tarpaper shack in Louisiana. What kept her going in spite of the odds? "I seen," she said, "I seen a new world coming." In Jesus' own earthly ministry, in his death and resurrection, a new world began to emerge on the scene. At his coming again, all things will be made new and whole – just as God always intended for the creation.

In the meantime, in this in-between time, we are called to be vigilant and responsive to the needs of others. In our lifetimes, we may or may not see the time that the prophet Isaiah foresaw when nations "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." It doesn't seem likely that Isaiah's prophecy will be realized in our lives concerning that time when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." However, that doesn't let us off the hook! In our own ways, we are called to be peacemakers, who sow peace in all directions. We are called to be messengers of the Good news, ambassadors for Christ, and bearers of God's love to this dark, lonely, and hurting world. That's what we are called to do in this time of watching and waiting for our Lord, who will come again.

And, what's in it for us? On the one hand, nothing because we are only doing what we are supposed to do in obedient response to God's gracious and overflowing love in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, everything because, as we live in obedience to God's command, our lives will be more fulfilled and even more blessed.

Remember, if you will, Jesus will come like a thief in the night – whether at the end of the age or, perhaps, even today or tomorrow, next week, month, or year. He doesn't come on the scene like a thief, who plunders or harms or kills. Rather, he comes to us and takes away from us in order to give us so much more. Like a thief in the night, Jesus takes away our sins and then gives us the joy that comes with forgiveness. Like a thief, Jesus removes our need to be in control and then helps us to trust in God, Who is in control of our lives. Like a thief in the night, Jesus strips us of our fears and replaces them with faith in the One, Who is always faithful. Jesus takes away our fear of death and gives us the assurance that nothing will be able to separate us

from God – ever! Like a thief in the night, Jesus barges into our lives, shatters our independence, and leads us into deeper communion with God and community with others. Like a thief in the night, Jesus may startle us into realizing that our possessions have possessed us and our freedom is gained when we learn to let go and especially learn to give to others.

One day a woman called Will Willimon, who was her pastor; she was crying so hard he could hardly understand her. He eventually made out her tragic words, “I have been robbed! Someone has come in and stolen all of my family heirlooms! The silver! The china! All the things that my mother accumulated and gave to me, gone!” He rushed over to her house, to find the woman overcome with grief. He said: “I knew how much these things meant to her, how she treasured them, was proud of them, lovingly recalled them as an inheritance from her parents.” “This thing could kill her,” said one of the people in the congregation who knew her. I was worried about her future.

And yet, about six months later, we were talking, and I was shocked to hear her say, “In one sense, the burglary was one of the best things that has happened to me. I didn’t realize it, but I had become tied down to those things. I was afraid to leave the house for fear this might happen. I spent half of my day polishing that silver, keeping up all that old china. That was really stupid when you think about it. Life ought to be more. I thought I would die after the burglary. But I’ve come to the conclusion that I may be better off without all that stuff.”

We cling so tightly to so much stuff. Sometimes, we think of ourselves as collecting things, when the reality is our things are busy controlling us. When things get torn away from us, it may be possible for us to think of our lives as having improved. We haven’t so much lost our possessions as regained our lives!

Perhaps as we enter the Advent season and head toward Christmas, Jesus will surprise us - like a thief in the night - and strip us of our culture’s deceptive emphasis on buying more and more things or wondering what things we will amass. And maybe, just maybe, he will replace those longings with the longing to welcome the Christ into our heart anew, to feel calm within our own skin, and to share godly love with all those around us. If Jesus can come like a thief in the night, and remove all of our frantic busyness and over-crowded schedules and replace them with the peace that passes all understanding, chances are it will be our best and merriest Christmas ever. Amen.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, come. Come like a thief in the night and strip away from us all of those things, all of those fears and anxieties and problems, that create distance between us and with one another. O Lord Jesus, you come to us like a good thief, who robs us of that which needs to be removed from our lives, and then you surprise us by giving us gifts that we didn’t know we wanted or needed. Help us to look for you, long for you, love you more, and love others as you love us. When you come like a thief in the night, may you find us hard at work, striving faithfully to do our part so that God’s kingdom may truly come here on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

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