

Like a Thief in the Night

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Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, or the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But 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. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

I.

We had a friend from Rebecca’s college days come out to visit a couple weeks back. Before her arrival, Iris, our six-year old, kept referring to her as ‘The Guest.’ “When will ‘The Guest’ arrive?” she asked. Iris knew that something significant was afoot. The Guest’s imminent arrival set into motion not only cleaning the house but preparing a guest room.

All of sudden, the guest room seemed as if it were in sore need of attention. It didn’t take long before it became a quite lovely room. I even said to Rebecca that maybe we ought to take the guest room. It had an orchid in it . . . gracing that room with its beautiful colors. It was still empty, but it was full of anticipation. It seemed so ready. . . .

Advent is a season of anticipation, expectation, making ready — the season when we prepare for the guest, Jesus, who is going to return to us at any moment. That’s the idea with the Christmas decorations, making ready for infant Jesus.

But with Matthew, there’s a twofold problem: it doesn’t seem Jesus’ sense of timing is very good; we don’t know when he is to arrive. And, second, there is this disturbing image, Jesus returning like a thief in the night.

Jesus says that people were filling their bucket lists, just like in the days of Noah. They were drinking, enjoying life, not in any bad way, mind you, just the ordinary way. Good times for good people. They were marrying and being walked down the aisle. And then, snap, it happened. A ring at the door, an urgent call, an unexpected visitor — an event that might even have seemed more like an intruder rather than a guest.

If we weren't feeling uncomfortable already, Jesus says his return will be like someone breaking into your house . . . if you knew that it was your house, or your apartment, or your car that was going to get broken into, you'd stay awake all night. You'd be ready. But that's what a thief counts on, that you won't be ready.

II.

We know that feeling. If you've ever had the experience of an unexpected guest, a friend from out of town, maybe Matthew speaks to you. Your guest comes in and as soon as you see the laundry on the floor, you scoop it up, and it disappears somewhat conspicuously behind your back.

But sometimes the guest feels more like an intruder.

This was the case for Ulysses S. Johnson in 2010. He was sitting on a friend's porch when a teenager approached him on a bicycle. Before he knew it, he was looking down a gun barrel, when the teenager yelled, "Kick it out!" Give me your wallet. Instinctively, Johnson grabbed the gun but as he did, the teen pulled the trigger, and the gunshot tore through his hand.

He became one of the 800 people wounded by gun violence in Baltimore that year. As a result of that wound, he had a lot of surgeries. But even more difficult than the surgery, was the anger, the desire for revenge, the raw depression.

The doctor who worked on his hand said that the hand is closely associated with our root identity: "Hands," he explained, "are highly visible, unique to the individual and used to communicate with others. Devastating hand injuries . . . can be the source of significant social and emotional distress."

Johnson was no exception. "I kept questioning, 'Why did this happen to me?' I just walked outside and almost lost my life.' I didn't want to be around anyone. I was depressed."

A wounded hand is highly visible.

III.

In the beginning of Matthew 24, Jesus said that that this temple will be in ruins. The guest room for God, will be in ruins. But I wonder if perhaps Jesus was actually speaking of his own body, his root identity as God with us, God made human, his hands which would carry the wounds of the nails.

On the night before his betrayal, Jesus said, If it be your will, let this cup pass from me. We feel that prayer. Maybe we're not ready.

Maybe, in a way, that's okay. Who in the Bible was ever ready? Was Moses ready to go see Pharaoh? How about the prophets? Mary, mother of Jesus, she wasn't ready. So maybe that's okay if we're not ready.

Matthew will actually say that Jesus is always with us, even to the end of the age, so being "ready" is somewhat moot. There's no return because Jesus never left! But today's text introduces the concept of Jesus' imminent return.

Perhaps the tension between Jesus always being with us and his apparent absence is a bit like the way we care for friends who are absent. We care about them; we carry them in our hearts. But when they say they're coming to visit, then we start getting our house ready. Likewise, Advent is about keeping our accounts with God low; attending worship, praying, serving others.

But when Jesus shifts the metaphor to an intruder, then we may have to rethink this Jesus we have in mind. Obviously, Jesus isn't saying that he is breaking the law, behaving criminally. Instead, it's almost as if Jesus is saying, I come not only as a thief *in* the night, but as the one who steals the despair *of* night and replaces it with the hope and love of God.

Our text from Isaiah captures this, with the prophet who sees God's presence turning swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks. The constant crisis of swords and spears, learning the art and science of war, will be turned into a completely different picture. When God returns, we will seek wisdom; we will plant gardens rather than make war — and the very instruments that inflicted suffering, will become a sign of God's healing power.

God will come like a thief in the night — delivering us from a night bristling with swords, to a new and brighter tomorrow.

That's the real crisis, the crisis of salvation history.

For people of faith, the crisis that really counts is not the collapse of the guest house, the temple, or the fact that there was no room at the inn when Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph; the crisis that counts for us is the crisis of resurrection coming into our world, a life-giving God invading a death-dealing world.

IV.

Johnson, who was shot in the hand, didn't stay in the ruins of his personal tragedy. He might have done. But he thought about childhood friends who'd been murdered. Four through gun violence, one through stabbing. "I was shot," he said. "But I wasn't dead."

On one of his many doctor's appointments, he was driving down Pennsylvania Avenue, and seeing all the poverty and need, his heart ached. It ached more than his hand; his heart ached more with compassion than with anger. With that wounded hand, he reached out to his friends, neighbors, asking for clothing donations.

Johnson's hand still cramps up, almost every day.

He feels the wounds.

And for seven years now,
he's been helping people who need it most.

Johnson says he's forgiven the person whose actions changed his life forever. He says, "He probably didn't know a single moment could change his life. I didn't know."

"Sometimes," he says, "it takes tragedy to see things differently."

Simone Weil, a French mystic from the early twentieth century, might agree. In her words:

"The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact
that it does not seek a **supernatural remedy** for suffering
but a **supernatural use** for it." (Simone Weil, *Grace and Gravity*, 73)

In 2012, two years after Johnson was wounded, he founded, Positivity Builds Generations. Through this organization, he and volunteers collect donated clothing for distribution to those in need; they pack and distribute hot meals during the holidays.

He's been doing this for seven years now.

Regularly.

Predictably.

In a form,
and with a hand,
that none would desire.

Almost like a thief in the night.

May it be so for each of us.

Amen.