

**Matthew 24:36-44 (NRSV)**

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel is a not very gentle reminder at the start of the season of Advent that we live in a literal sense between Advents. We look back to the Advent of the baby Jesus two millennia ago. We also look forward to a second Advent, Christ's return in glory, and our first Gospel reading in the season of Advent always describes this second event, the coming return of Christ.

This is a little jarring. We're hoping for a bit of Christmas cheer, some light words to fit our light moods in this frazzled but fundamentally hopeful season. Instead we hear about the flood coming and sweeping everyone away, and Jesus telling us that the coming return of the Son of Man will be a lot like that. Yikes. Two people in the field, one will be taken and one left. Two women grinding meal together, one taken and one left. Actually,

rather than “taken,” “received” is more appropriate. One received, one left behind. And since field and house work was generally done by family members, what this really says is that one family member will be received into God’s embrace, and one will be left for whatever is scheduled for Act Two. As I say, the reading is a little jarring.

The rest of the reading has the same barely disguised sense of menace – if the owner of the house had known when the thief was coming, he’d have stayed awake. That section struck me given what happened to young Sean Taylor, the Redskin player who was killed this past week.

This text has caused careful readers a lot of heartburn, historically, around three main questions. First, how is it that Jesus, the pre-existent Son of God, the Savior who has existed throughout all eternity, how does he not know when he will return? Second, does the reading really compare Jesus to the thief in the night? And finally, what does it mean to be ready?

I thought about all of these questions as I thought about today’s sermon. Let me see if I can add a little perspective. My frequent inspiration and muse, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells us that at the time that Matthew was writing, his community was troubled by two opposite but equally debilitating views. The first was the feeling that the world was about to end – that Christ would soon return and begin sorting us into sheep and goats. People were so fixated about wanting to be sheep (or goats – I’m never sure) that they were not attending to the needs of their fellow believers, the needs of widows and orphans, the sick and the needy. The second view was the opposite one – that Christ had been taken up into heaven and had not yet returned after 40 years or more and maybe he wasn’t going to. People were beginning to doubt that Christ would *ever* return and were beginning to fall away from the faith.

For Matthew, both of these fears, that the world was going to end or that it was not – *both* of these fears were distractions from the work of the people of God, which was, remember, to go and make disciples. In today's reading, Jesus goes as far as to say, even *he* doesn't know the time of his return. I don't know whether he did or he didn't – the important thing is that it doesn't matter. Your job, whether the world ends or doesn't, is the same – to love God, to love one another, and to make disciples.

Matthew tells us a very brief but intriguing parable – if the owner of the house had known when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not left his house to be broken into. So be ready!

This is such a quick parable, we generally don't look at it carefully, but I found myself wondering, who is the owner of the house? And who is the thief?

Imagine that you are the owner of the house. And you have this house running well, all the latest electronic gadgets, flat-screen TV, entertainment room with speakers everywhere, everyone with their own room, their own cellphone, their own computer, so much stuff they don't even have to see each other if they don't want to. And you work from before sunrise to after it's dark to pay for all of this – maybe you spend hours commuting. And you do it because you are the owner of the house and you want to provide the best things for the people who live there.

But there are little cracks in this picture. When you get home, you're a little on edge, mentally and emotionally exhausted. Maybe you drink too much, maybe snap at the kids or your wife or husband. And late at night when everyone else is asleep, you're awake. And you're wondering whether this whole thing is making any sense. What am I doing, why am I doing it? Did I do anything worth doing today? Why am I so tired, but I can't sleep? Why don't I know my kids anymore? Why don't I know my wife

or my husband anymore? Was this what I wanted when we started out?

And that's when the thief comes. But the thief doesn't want your electronic gear, doesn't want your flat-screen TV, your cellphone or your computer. In fact, he doesn't want to take anything. He wants to give you something. He wants to give you a reason, a meaning, a purpose. He wants you to open your eyes and your heart and your mind to what he's been trying to tell you. He wants to tell you that you are a person of infinite value, a child of his father, and that he loves you and wishes you would get off this treadmill and look at your life as the precious and irreplaceable gift that it is.

And that is what it means to be ready. We have so much invested in being the owners of our houses that we let our houses own us. We live in the past, in what we have always done, in what we have always known or believed. We live in the future, in what we are planning or hoping or dreaming. But we can't be found right now, right here. We're always somewhere else, sometime else. We're in the past, recalling something or trying to forget something, or regretting something, wishing something had gone differently or better. Or we're in the future, planning something, hoping for something or afraid of something, avoiding something, maybe dreading that meeting or confrontation or argument.

But the thief comes not in the past or in the future but in the present moment, right now. And that's the one thing that we're not prepared for, that Christ should come right now, in the form of someone you know or someone you don't know, who needs something from you or who has something to offer you, something that isn't either part of your plans or part of your past, but rather is something entirely new. Because that's what we're not ready for – something new. And that's exactly what Christ offers us, if we're ready for it – something new.

I often remember Carolyn Lenz's talk a couple of years ago. She talked about trying something outside our comfort zones, something new, something different, something we didn't have planned. That is what being ready is. Being willing to try something new, something outside our comfort zone. But the opportunity is not going to come when you expect it. It's going to come to you like a thief in the night. Being ready means being willing to do what Christ asks, when he asks it.

We began with three questions. How does Jesus not know when he will return? The answer is that Jesus returns all the time, in fact Jesus is always returning, always offering us new ways to live, new ways to be present for God and for each other. As to when he will come for the last time, if we're always ready, then we'll be ready then, too. Does the parable really compare Jesus to the thief in the night? Yes, Jesus is the thief God sends to steal our vanity and complacency and to give us opportunity, novelty and unexpected beauty. And what does it mean to be ready? Being ready means being in the present, not buried in the past or stuck in the future, but being present to the people and the opportunities all around you. Being present and being willing to try something new, something God has in mind for you.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Open yourself not only to the advent of the baby Jesus two millennia ago, but also to the advent of Christ in our midst.

Today is also Commitment Sunday. Commit yourself to being ready to take a risk to try something new in this new year of the church. Commit yourself to this surprising Christ who comes like a thief in the night, not to take but to offer, not to steal but to give, not to break in but to break open. Commit yourself to being and becoming a new creation.

Amen.