

December 1, 2019 Fourth Sunday of Advent
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Peace Lutheran Church - Austin, TX

GOSPEL

Matthew 24: 36-44

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew,
the twenty-fourth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said to the disciples,] “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.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

I wonder if you can remember what it felt like
the last time you knew that you really helped
in some meaningful way?

I wonder if you can remember one of the first times?
One of those times you got to do big, grown-up work...
something that really mattered?
When you held a screwdriver...or a rolling pin...
a broom...or a garden trowel...

before you really knew what to do with it...
And you were a helper.

And it felt so good and so special and so important.

I wish it was easier
to find our way back to that feeling on the hard days...
when the work is heavy and foggy and dull instead of shiny and new.

I have pictures of all my children
in the kitchen over the years...
especially in these holiday weeks...
wearing tiny aprons...
rolling dough and stirring pots of stock and batter...
so excited and so serious at the same time.

And even though that sparkle fades...
and weeding and making dinner don't have the same allure...
there are times when it still comes to us.

It still fills our hearts so much
when we know we are part of something that matters...
or where we reach beyond our comfort
to learn new work
and try new ways of being in the world that bear the kingdom...

I've told a few of you the story of my first Thanksgiving turkey
in the past few weeks.
I still get that feeling of joy at doing big new work when I think of it.

My housemate Stacey and I
were hosting our friends for a Thanksgiving away from home.
(I don't know if the term Friendsgiving had been coined yet
way back then...but if it had, I don't think I'd learned it yet.)
Our house was the best for hosting, so we did...
which then also meant we were the cooks of the turkey.

The only problem was that we were both vegetarians...
vegetarians that ate locally
and sustainably-sourced meat at times...
but vegetarians
with very meager meat-cooking skills nonetheless.

Stacey undertook the task of finding
an adequately humanely and sustainably raised turkey with vigor.
She interviewed the vendors at the farmers' market
like she was looking for a Fulbright Scholar...
until she came to a woman...
who was entirely unbothered by the depth of her third degree.

She just smiled and told Stacey,
"Oh honey...our turkeys have lovely lives.
They sit on the porch with us in the morning
while we drink our coffee.
They're very happy and free...
You know...this health inspector came the other day
with his little clipboard...and he got so flustered.

We were there on the porch...
drinking our coffee and reading the paper...with the turkeys...
and he just started pointing his pencil around...
'Well...these birds need to be in some kind of enclosure...'
And I just looked at him and said,
'Maybe *you* need to be in some kind of enclosure.'

And that was all it took.
Our turkey farmer had been found.

And what's funny is...
apart from the very high number of phone calls
made to our respective mothers that day...
I don't really remember how the turkey turned out.
I just remember how it felt important to be in charge of it.
And I remember the warmth and friendship of that evening.

(I suppose I would remember if it was a disaster...
so it must have been ok, at least...)

Every great thing, big or small, we can say we've had a hand in...
is a gift...the chance to be a part of work that matters...
and I say all this because I think
that is what Jesus is offering today...
in this strange teaching
about the return of the Son of Humanity.

In Matthew's gospel we hear this illustration...
how his return will be unexpected.
Jesus compares it to the time of the Great Flood.
And in the verses that come after this he will compare it
to faithful and unfaithful slaves,
to foolish and watchful bridesmaids
and to the slaves and the talents.

In today's teaching
(and in the parables that follow, in their own way)...
when the anticipated one arrives...
some are taken...and some are left behind...
So, one simple question we might ask ourselves is...
Do you want to be taken? Or left behind?

Because Tim LaHaye and Hal Lindsey and their ilk
have pretty deeply ingrained in us that image
of being whisked up to heaven
and raptured away from the troubles of the earth.

But listen again to how Jesus puts it.

It will be like the time of Noah...some will be taken and others left. There
will be people working in the field
and some will be grinding meal.
One taken and the other left.

But who should we want to be?

Well...Noah...of course...

but what about the ones taken or left from the field
or grinding grain?

Would it help if I told you that another way that word "taken" is used
is "taken as a prisoner?"

Is it better to be taken or to be left?

In the case of the slaves and the bridesmaids...

the ones who are left are the ones who stay close
to the master and bridegroom...

the ones who don't disappear
into the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Do we want to be taken away or left?

Well...in this telling, at least...

if we want to be part of the kin-dom
where the Son will return and rule...

then we actually want to be left behind...

not "taken" or "swept away" like the ones taken in the flood.

This future is not one where the chosen ones are whisked away
into eternal leisure and comfort...

Here the ones who are chosen get to remain with the Son...

and be a part of building the kin-dom.

We get to be part of important work...

work that fills us with joy and purpose...

like a kid with a screwdriver or a rolling pin...

or a goofy twenty-something year-old

figuring out how to cook a turkey.

God tends to hang out with the ones who are left behind...

doing the work...looking for the next right thing.

And...in all of this,

we are reminded that the return of God
will never be something we predict or know in advance.
God, apparently, does not send an RSVP ahead of the party.
So much so, in fact, that Jesus compares himself
to a thief that comes in the night.

And how do you prepare for a thief?

Not by knowing when they are coming...

but by assuming they might come at any moment, right?

That's the whole premise on which we buy fancy locks
and cameras and security systems...

There's a great scene from the Netflix series *Grace and Frankie*,
after the two friends have had a home break-in...
and Frankie has exactly the impossible reaction
to trying to feel safe and prepared for future dangers.

The two go to a community safety class...

and the police officer leading the session says,

"The key is to make it look like someone is always home" ...

and Frankie starts muttering as he continues:

"...always home...never leaving. Got it."

"A burglar is 90% less likely to enter the home
if they think that someone is awake..."

"We've got to be awake constantly."

Then he goes onto to explain how to create the *illusion*
that someone is always at home and awake...

which Frankie concedes makes more sense
than never leaving or sleeping.

Obviously...we cannot just sit and keep watch
without sleeping or carrying on with our lives...

So the question is...what are we to do...

if the Son will return like a thief at an unexpected time?

How can we prepare for the time when he will come...

when we hope to be left behind with him to do the work of God?

Well...perhaps the Apostle Paul can help us here.

What do we do, to be ready to be part of the work of the Son
when he returns...whenever that will be?

We love...and then...we love some more...

Paul is so insistent on this in his letter to the Romans, in fact,
that just before the verses we heard read a few moments ago...
when he describes the greatest commandment
that we so often remember as:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul
and mind and strength
and love your neighbor as yourself”...

Paul actually just skips to the end...
he goes right to loving our neighbor.

When we don't know what to do -
we love our neighbor.

When we don't know when Jesus will show up -
we love our neighbor.

When things are really bad -
we love our neighbor.

When things are really good - you know what we do?
We love our neighbor.

When we want to be helpers in big important work
that will wake us up from complacency and connect us to joy -
We love our neighbor.

When you don't know how to prepare for Christ to come -
love your neighbor.

When you live in a world full of swords
that needs more plough shares -
love your neighbor.

When you don't know how to love God -
love your neighbor, and you'll find out you are loving God.

When we don't know what is coming next...which is always...
we can still be part of big important work.

We can love.

We can love...from that deep well of love first given to us.

And we will find that the Son who we wait for
is also always here...

claiming us and this whole present mess
for his purposes and plans.

We are his...his beloved ones...and we get to be his helpers.

What joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.