

THEME: The Thief Who Gives

SCRIPTURE: Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house has known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Matthew 24:42-44

As a pastor, I have spent a fair amount of time listening to people talk about their experiences with God. And though there are great differences, because God tends to come into a person's life in particular, personal, unique ways, there are some common themes. One of the most common themes is surprise.

There was a time when I thought God mostly came to people when they were going through some tough times in their lives. Their nerves were frayed, their emotions were raw due to some difficult or tragic event that has happened to them. Therefore they were open to the entrance of God into their lives, or they felt that they particularly needed God, so God came to them.

But after years of listening to people describe their actual experience of the advent of God into their lives, I had to admit that God often seems to come to people when they were not prepared. They weren't looking for God, weren't expecting God, maybe they really didn't feel they needed God. And yet God came to them.

Perhaps this ought to tell us that the entrances of God among us are works of God, rather than based on our heightened awareness, our well-developed sensitivity, or even our need. God is free and sovereign. He is free to come and go as He pleases. Therefore intrusions among us are bound to seem surprising and unexpected.

The stories I have heard are about people driving to work, or sitting around the breakfast table, or sitting quietly at home watching television, or waking up in the morning, or moving through a crowded airline terminal. What a strange place for God to come! What strange timing. And yet the very strangeness itself is a reminder that God's comings and goings among us are God's work not ours.

As a chaplain in the Army, I once had a woman who was active in the chapel call me crying so hard I could hardly understand her. I eventually was able to hear and understand her tragic story, "I have been robbed," she said! "Someone has come in and stolen all of my family heirlooms! The silver! The China! All of the things that my mother accumulated and gave to me, gone!"

I rush over to her house and found that this woman was overcome with grief. I got a real sense of how much these things meant to her, how she treasured them, was proud of them as she lovingly recalled them as an inheritance from her parents. One of the members of the chapel

who knew her well said; “This thing could kill her.” After listening to her, I, too, was concerned for her wellbeing.

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 of what 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.”

Perhaps we ought to make this a parable for how a thief may rip off that aspect of ourselves that needs ripping off. 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 we have regained our lives!

In our text in Matthew, Jesus tells us to remain watchful. Jesus said: “I’ll be back shortly.” But one day passed into another and another, and still Jesus had not returned. People waited. The first generation of Christians gradually passed from the scene. People were disappointed by the length of their wait. Matthew wrote these words to a people who were growing impatient in waiting.

Therefore, these words were also addressed to us. When you think about it, a time of disappointed waiting is in a sense the only time the church has ever known. If they got impatient waiting for Jesus for 50 or 60 years, by the time Matthew’s gospel was written, how much greater might our impatience be with waiting after more than two thousand years!

It is good that we do not know exactly when Christ will return. If we knew the precise date, we might be tempted to be lazy in our work for Christ and turn ourselves over to Him just before His return. Heaven is not our only goal; we must not allow ourselves to be tied down by things but we must do the works of Him who has called us into His service.

To people who have become despairing and disillusioned in waiting, today’s gospel said, “Be patient. Hold on. Stay alert. After all, God may come among you like a thief in the night.”

A thief? What kind of image of God is that?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you came among us, but not as we expected. We expected power; you came as vulnerability. We expected glory; you came among the poor. We expected the Lord on our terms; you transformed the world into God’s terms. Lord, give us grace to love you as you are, not as we would have you to be.*

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