

“A Thief in the Night”

About thirty years ago a Korean pastor convinced about 100 people in his congregation that he knew when Jesus was going to return to Earth. It would be sometime in 1989. He also convinced them that because Jesus was coming back, they would have no need for their money and assets anymore. They believed him and gave him all that they owned. They then looked forward to the return of Christ.

Jesus, of course, did not return. The pastor was eventually arrested for criminal fraud. Some of the money was recovered, but most people lost most of their life savings. Ironically, the pastor who said Jesus was coming in the next year had invested most of the money he took in 30 year bearer bonds.

There is a fascination, almost obsession, among certain Christians about when Jesus will return. Some will believe almost anything about when this will happen. You have probably heard or read about other instances in which people have predicted when Jesus will return. There are also some Christians who focus on the “rapture.” They believe that some will be removed from the earth and will be taken immediately into heaven. Some use part of our scripture today, “At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left,” to substantiate this belief.

There are also those who think that humans can take actions which will bring about the second coming of Christ. These beliefs have become very prevalent since the State of Israel was formed in 1948. Recent events such as the moving of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem have caused some to think that the second coming is at hand.

Those who believe that humans can somehow hasten the return of Christ are misguided. Only God will determine when this will happen. And such beliefs clearly go against the theological lessons of the scriptures we have today from Matthew 24:36-44 and Romans 13:11-14. We do not know the day or hour Jesus will return; only the Father knows.

There are three main points to take from our scripture passage today. First, the good news is that Jesus will return to earth at some point. Just as we celebrate Jesus' first coming to Earth as the Christ child, we celebrate his return. Even those in the early church looked forward to his return some two thousand years ago.

The second point is that the Human One (Jesus) will come at a time that you do not know. Despite being told this fact by Matthew a long time ago, many Christians have refused to remember it. They want to believe that somebody can tell them when Jesus will come back.

I believe part of the problem is that people do not want to deal with the problems they have on earth. They fail to realize that God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit can help them now. They just want to look forward to heaven in the future without considering that they can have a full life now.

But Jesus uses the metaphor that he will return unexpected like a thief in the night. This metaphor makes me think of all the commercials today about getting home security systems. They seemed to have increased; I don't think it's because we just started having home invasions; I believe it's because these companies think they have some great technology they never had before. I also think about so-called porch pirates, people who are stealing packages delivered to homes.

I'm not sure we totally appreciate the metaphor unless our home has been robbed. The worst thing that ever happened to me was that I had a set of golf clubs taken out of my garage. I didn't realize it until about a week after it happened. It was frustrating, but I didn't lose any sleep over it.

Having something stolen from your home, though, can be disruptive and terrifying. I share a story from Rev. Matthew Johnson, associate pastor of Barrington United Methodist Church in Illinois, who wrote about his childhood experience in this week's issue of *Christian Century* magazine: "I have a childhood memory of discovering that someone had broken into my home. My

family and I returned just before evening, and the sun had almost set behind our 1920s-era bungalow. I remember being struck by the way the fading orange light obscured the details of the structure and the lone oak tree behind it. ...As we walked up the steps, things felt amiss. It was difficult to tell in the twilight haze, but the lines of the door were off. A small triangle of darkness rested in the kick plate of the screen door. The oak door behind it, normally a burgundy rectangle, had become a trapezoid. ...The door was ajar.

As it turned out nothing was missing. The police came and dusted for fingerprints, but no one left a trace. The police officer commented they were lucky.

But, as Rev. Johnson stresses, they were not lucky. They were left with a feeling of uneasiness. For a long time every creak of the floor or rattle of the furnace made them jumpy. Every little thing that seemed different had them second-guessing that officer's assessment. It felt as if they were constantly guarding against a ghost.

As Rev. Johnson points out, we constantly have to be on guard because we do not know when Christ will return. We need to have a feeling of uneasiness. The kingdom of God has to be sneaky---because otherwise we probably would not cooperate in how we should be as Christians. Paul writes about us getting rid of the actions of darkness and putting on the weapons of light. The third point of today is

that we should always be living the life we should live, because we don't know the time of Christ's return. Instead of focusing on when Jesus will be here, we should focus on being prepared.

Rev. Johnson makes an interesting observation of Jesus's return being like a thief in the night. All Christians need to have a transformation of their lives when they accept Christ as their savior. He writes that if a new beginning is to take place, a number of things each person values will have to be stolen---things far more harmful than the dishonorable behaviors Paul mentions in Roman 13 (behaviors of drunkenness, sleeping around, fighting, obsession and obscene behavior). Johnson points out his own behaviors of divisiveness, anger, and finding fault with others. He says that he struggles with giving up these things willingly. Having them stolen might be the only way he can let them go.

As we close today, let us reflect on those behaviors of ours we need stolen away so that we can be more Christ like. In our passage today Matthew delivers a blunt reminder. Advent can be a season to remember that what I hope for is rarely what I need, nor is the way God gives it the way I'd prefer to receive it. Let us all be ready for God to be like a thief in the night, being disruptive to bring change with the aim of establishing joy.

