

1st Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Matthew 24:36-44

'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.

As I said before, Happy New Year! Today is the first day of the liturgical year, the Sunday in which we open up the season of Advent and prepare for the coming of Christ.¹ Each and every year, we begin the season of Advent by lighting the candle for "hope" representing the hope that is found in the coming of Christ to save a broken world in need of redemption. We light this candle of hope for the grace that has already come to us in Jesus Christ and the grace that has been promised to us, the final day of victory in which God has God's final say and death, pain, and tears will be no more. Sounds good, doesn't it?

I've always looked at this particular Sunday in the liturgical calendar with a particular "bittersweetness." Today we light the candle of hope. But that poor candle always looks so lonely on this particular Sunday. It stands all by itself. It has yet to be joined by the flames of the candles for peace, love, and joy (and not to mention the Christ candle itself). Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, it is its job to stand alone and provide the light until the other candles join it in the following weeks.

Hope is hard work. It's a full-time job. Hope is a relentless exercise in patience, trust, and courage. There are times in your life when you have stood with a great crowd of people all hoping towards something better, something stronger, something truer, something purer. However, I'm willing to bet there are many of you out there who can remember times in your life when you've felt like this lone candle, alone in hoping when others cannot.

There have been days when hope seems to be plentiful. Then again, many of you probably know what it's like to have days devoid of hope, where you simply lay your head on your pillow at night and pray that hope comes in the morning.

Hope is one of those things that can be hard to define. It is perhaps the most precious of things. However, we do not know what "hope" looks like, we only witness what it does. It's like the wind which moves about invisibly, and yet we see her paths in the trees and the leaves that fall from the sky this time

¹ I have to give tremendous credit to Barbara Brown Taylor for this sermon. Much of this sermon is an homage to her sermon entitled "God's Beloved Thief" which is published in her collection of sermons entitled "Home By Another Way."

of year. Where is hope? What is hope? Why is it so important? What does hope feel like for you? What does hope feel like for those you love? Why is it important to have hope in God? What good has hope done us in this broken world?

All these are valid questions and they are questions that I have no intention (or ability) to answer fully in this sermon. But they touch the surface of the curiosity of hope that compels us this time every year when we don blue, begin singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and light the solitary hope candle. Most years, this Sunday falls upon the one immediately after Thanksgiving, when we are still recovering from food and family. What might today teach us as we gather to speak of the hope we lean into in this Advent Season?

Today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew is a passage that sounds rather ominous at first sight. First, Jesus speaks in frustratingly generic terms of "that day and hour." Then, we hear of the dreadful flood during the time of Noah. Then, we are told that two people will be in a field and one will disappear. Likewise, two women will be grinding meal and one will disappear. Then, we are told that a thief is on his way; a relentless thief who will come in the night when we least expect him.

At first glance, this passage does not seem very "hopeful." It, indeed, seems at first to be a bizarre passage to ponder on this first week in Advent. It sounds more like an ominous quote on the back cover of the latest thriller piece of fiction. But that's not where it belongs. Today, it belongs in our hearts for us to ponder what the Spirit is saying to us this day.

However you interpret today's passage, one thing is clear. A thief is one the way. A clever thief. A thief that will not stop until he gets exactly what he came for. A thief is something to be avoided. Thieves are why we secure our homes and our credit card numbers and our wallets and our purses. Thieves are why we are told to avoid certain places at night. We are taught to fear thieves and to avoid them at all costs. I remember when I took my first trip to a big city without my parents, they reminded me time and time again to keep vigilant, to be aware of my surroundings, and to keep my belongings close at hand. Because, if I did not do these things, the thieves would get in.

We are taught then, from an early age, that thievery is bad. That we should never steal and we should take care to be as wise as serpents to prevent people stealing from us.

But then today's passage throws us a curveball. This thief, this terrible, scary, sneaky thief....is no one but Jesus Christ himself. That thief that we've been taught to fear is the very person we've been called to worship and follow and know intimately.

Jesus Christ comes to us in the unknown hour, bringing the gift of hope, but we have our guards up, so he has to be clever as to how he gets to us.

Did you know that we have a natural tendency to build walls? Walls that keep things out, people out, emotions out; walls that are built to keep us comfortable. Sometimes we shield ourselves from things that will harm us. Other times, we build walls to keep things (or people) out that just might transform our lives for the better.

This time of year is the Season of Hope, or at least that's what we call it. However, this is the busiest time of year, a time when we tend to pile WAY to many things into our hands. We over book ourselves. We over commit ourselves. We convince ourselves that if the to-do list doesn't get done then the world will come to a crashing halt. We trick ourselves into thinking that the world depends on us, that we alone have the capability to provide salvation and hope and comfort. And, what's more, all of these

things are done with the best intentions. But, whether we realize it or not, brick by brick by brick gets built up around our hungry hearts. The alarm has been set. The four-digit PIN to our hearts has been locked. We have done the dutiful, if foolish, work of shielding ourselves from transformation and sabbath.

However, perhaps today on this First Sunday in Advent, it is an appropriate time to take stock of our lives during this busy season and see what guards we have put up to keep this “beloved thief of God”² from breaking into our hearts.

You see, this is a time of year when the air tingles with anticipation for what God is about to do in the world. We have before us a journey in need of completion, a journey which takes our trust and our attention. But how many barriers have we put up between us and the thief who seeks to steal our hearts?

You see, Jesus Christ, God’s Beloved Thief, would come during the day but we’re too busy with the holiday fundraiser. He could be knocking at the door around dinner time but we’re too busy wrapping the presents. The thief could come in the morning but we’re too busy getting to the store early to catch the good deals. The thief could come around early afternoon but that’s when us church workers are way too busy printing bulletins, coming up with the 2017 budget, and making sure the heat is set to come on at the right time.

Now, folks, don’t get me wrong. These things are important. The holiday parties, the fundraisers, the meals, the present wrapping, the travel to see family and friends; they are not “bad” things! But, sometimes, we can get drowned in them. Yes, sometimes we can get drowned in bad ways even in very good things! Sometimes, either knowingly or unknowingly, we board up the houses of our hearts and make it very difficult for Jesus Christ, God’s Beloved Thief, to get in.

You see, this thief, Jesus Christ, he comes at the unknown hour to catch us off our guard. He comes in the night when we are asleep, when we have let our guards down, when we have (for a moment at least) let go of the burdens of the day and released ourselves into the quiet of night. That’s when Jesus comes. Not necessary only at night, but at the time when you’ve let your guard down.

So, my prayer for us this day is that we might take some time to “let our guards down” this Advent season. Loosen up and listen and wait for the unexpected way that Christ may come and break into your hearts.

This thief comes to take away things. After all, that’s what thieves do. However, *this* thief just might take away from you something that you really don’t need. That guilt that buries you. That frustration that you have at your failure to be the world’s savior. That hurt that stifles your joy. That darkness that separates you from peace. That burden that you think only you can shoulder. Maybe those things might be stolen from you if you let them be stolen.

But then again, maybe this thief comes not just to take some things away but to bring things as well. Maybe, in that unexpected hour, your hurt might just be replaced by hope. Maybe, for just a moment in that quiet hour before the daily burdens take on their toll, you can be relieved of your anxiety and be bathed in the hope we have in God’s Beloved Thief.

So, as we begin this Season of Advent, I have a few questions for us.

² Again, with many thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for this phrase and metaphor!

What are some places/times in your life when you might be making it more difficult for Jesus to come in and do some work?

If God's Beloved Thief, Jesus Christ, were to break into your heart this evening when you least expect it, what would you want him to steal from you? What do you need to be relieved of?

If God's Beloved Thief, Jesus Christ, were to break into your heart this evening when you least expect it, what would you want him to bring to replace what he's taken from you? What do you need? What do you *hope for* right now?

Since we've been promised that this Beloved Thief will bring hope, what does hope look like to you? Like the thief who comes unexpected in the quiet hour, are there places in your life for hope to be found that perhaps you haven't thought to look at before? Where might hope be hiding?

Finally, as a worshipping community, as a family of faith, how might God be calling us to embrace hope unexpectedly? Yes, we have lit a candle for hope and that's all well and good. But how will we share the hope this beloved thief has brought us?

And so, you and I have a homework assignment for the week. Find one thing, one activity, one time to practice "letting your guard down" to make room for the hope Jesus brings to seep into your heart. Maybe put down the iPhone for a few minutes and step outside on a clear evening to appreciate the beauty of the winter stars. Maybe say "no" to that 15th holiday party invitation and, instead, have a cup of coffee with that friend or family member that you've lost touch with. Maybe take 10 or 15 minutes to do the daily devotional that we've made available today. Maybe take a break from balancing the checkbook and take a look at how well you are balancing your *life*. Maybe take a moment to stop taking yourself so seriously and laugh and appreciate for a moment that you are not the world's savior.

You see, the world's savior is a job description that has already been filled. And, that, gives us hope. We have hope on this first Sunday of Advent because we are filled with expectation that the places in our lives that are our most fortified are about to be compromised. They are about to be compromised by the love of heaven coming right down to our doorstep in the form of a vulnerable and beautiful baby. They are to be compromised not by a thief who comes with hurtful intentions, but by a loving savior who wants to give us hope, hope that all is not lost. Hope that you and I can do something to bring some love and light to this fractured world. Hope that the dawning of God's creation is still coming into our hearts, even in the most guarded of places.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.