

Matthew 24:29-44
Luke 12:39
I Thessalonians 5:02
II Peter 23:10
Revelation 3:03; 6:15

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Welcome to the Advent Season. Thirty-one days to the new year. Twenty-four shopping days until Christmas. Has either one got anything to do with Jesus? What, precisely, has either one got to do with Jesus?

We read six of the “Thief Passages” found in the New Testament. What do we learn from that? At the very least, it makes it clear that this was a favorite theme of the early church. Jesus will come as a thief in the night. He always has. He always will. Not our timetable. Not our doing. We do not go find Him. He comes to us. We never know when. We never know if. But it is very important to get ready, and stay ready.

I just lost most of America. Not that I ever had it, of course. But suppose someone were foolish enough to give me prime-time nationwide television coverage for thirty minutes this Advent Season. I would lose all but a tiny handful inside the first twenty seconds. Why? I have suggested that Jesus is in charge – not us. Our religious life, our spiritual awareness, our relationship to God, our awakening to the dimensions beyond, our faithful response, the level of our gratitude and our love – it depends upon Him, not on us. (“... *lest any one should boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9; I Corinthians 4:7))

In former times, there were various brands and flavors of blasphemy. One was idol worship – bowing down before images of man or beast as if they were gods. Many believe that Jesus was crucified primarily because He and His followers thought His connection with God was too close – that the identity between the two was becoming blurred.

Many things have changed over the years. It is a very different world. Yet some of the major themes have not changed as much as we like to think. We only make it *sound* a little different. What is the difference between *their* idolatry and *our* thinking we are in charge? The only reason humans make idols is so they can try to control the gods. We make images and try to find the right names so we can have more influence, and ultimately gain control. This or that pleases or displeases the god, and

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pretty soon we have it figured out so we can wrap the god around our little finger. Idol worship costs us effort and sacrifice, but it is worth it if we can get some control and be in charge of the outcome. Or we can try to find a shortcut to the desired results – claim that we are in charge without all the falderal. It is called “atheism.”

Nevertheless, modern America has tried to move beyond the sovereignty of God, even though it pretends to believe in God. We *think* we are in charge: How religious I am depends upon me. How faithful I am depends upon my degree of commitment and obedience. I can decide to be converted whenever I want to. I can decide when to feel close to God, when to make the prayer connections, when God will speak to me; I can even steer the conversation around to just about whatever subject I want to. My, me, mine ... even “my God” and “God as I understand him.” Oh my! My goodness ...

He comes as a thief in the night. Always has. Always will. We never know when. We never know if. We are not in charge. We cannot control it coming or going. We can get willing. We can want it. We can try to be ready. But if we think we are in charge of Jesus, we have hold of an idol. Many people will miss Advent again this year because they think Christmas is something they can bring, choreograph, plan, make happen – in whatever way they choose, in any way they want to. They do not know that Advent is about waiting and watching and hoping. They do not know that God has to initiate all relationship between us. They do not know that prayer is waiting upon the Lord, instead of bossing God around. We live in a culture that thinks *we* can bring Christmas every year, in our own calendar time, in whatever way we want to, according to whatever sentimental themes and threads most please us.

Many will miss Advent again this year because they think they are in charge. They will “do” Christmas their way. They will get exactly what they put into it – no more and no less. And God will not be there because there is no room for God, and God does not think it appropriate to shove hard enough to get in.

Oh, God will still come – in his own way and time. He comes like a thief in the night. He always has. He always will. That is what all the stories say. Nobody could have guessed or imagined that Jesus would come as He did, when He did, in the way that He did. Actually, He came into our world even more quietly and subtly than the stories say. A few of

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the lucky ones, and a few of the most aware, picked up on it pretty early. Most never did. He was born, lived, died, and was raised again – and most never even noticed. Most do not even still. But He still comes as a thief in the night – still picks us off one by one – now here ... now there. But you never know. Burning bush; coal of fire; catch of fish; minding your own business on the way to Damascus. A love you did not expect. A purpose or passion you did not even know you had. Some morning you are too slow getting off your knees as quickly as usual. Whammo! You never know. It is not our idea to become religious. The Spirit moves within. The Spirit reaches us. Everybody fights it at first – except for the pretenders. Modern-day Christmas is mostly for the pretenders.

Yes, I know. I need to correct. There are a few – a handful, a remnant – who use Advent as a time of spiritual preparation. They mean all their Christmas preparations as an invitation, a humble request, a sheer statement of willingness to receive, should the THIEF choose to come. And Christmas for them is a time of gratitude; a remembering of the mystery and power of His coming; an honoring of all that the Incarnation means to those who have responded to His coming, to His loving us, to His choosing us.

What about the fear? There is always so much fear around His coming. There always has been. When Messiah comes, what will He think of us? What changes will He make? In what ways will He be displeased? Will some things make Him angry? Can we imagine looking into the eyes of true justice and not feeling judged? Even if love is clearly surrounding us and forgiveness is clearly offered, can we imagine looking into the eyes of truth and justice and not feeling judged? I don't know about you, but with God, I do not fear punishment nearly as much as I fear his look of disappointment. I am not crass clear to the core, any more than you are. Underneath I really care. I do not wish to displease my God. Anything else is preferable to that. And it is not just theory, is it? We know from *experience*. And the old chant tolls: "God have mercy. Christ have mercy." Please, give me another chance. And He says, "Why else would I come?"

Lots of people will come to Christmas this year with no fear worse than the fear of buying an inappropriate Christmas present, or perhaps forgetting to get one and being embarrassed by that. Is that really all it's about? How tragic to expect so little.

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Others, not wanting to miss all the thrill and excitement, will drum up a little fear. Oh the end of the age! Oh the fires of Hell! It's like a cheap-shot production of a horror movie. With a little effort and imagination, we can give ourselves the thrill of an adrenaline rush. But eventually we leave the theater and go home unchanged. Maybe we talk about it over coffee and have a nightmare or two as an aftershock, but nothing really happens. The day after Christmas, we are the same old people in the same old world. Fear can control us for a while, but it does not transform. At the first opportunity, we always revert back to who we really are.

There are people, of course, who become so immersed in fear that they cannot function in ways we call normal. Fear can become a mental illness. All of us know there are ways in which fear is shutting us down – keeping us from our true identity and destiny. Faith, we say – trust in God – is the only antidote. There is no intelligent person on the face of the earth who cannot entertain legitimate fears at any moment in time, no matter what their circumstances. Every one of you can picture disasters that really could happen to you, and to our world. They are not irrational or unreasonable. They are live possibilities. Every single one of you can go terrified any time you choose to focus on your fears. And there is absolutely no way to guarantee that what you fear will not actually happen. Fear is big and real in our alienated, broken world. Most of us spend a good deal of time and energy in this life trying to get ourselves into some position where fear cannot reach us. It is like trying to heal greed by giving it money. Sooner or later, we have to choose between fear and faith. Until then, fear governs our lives. Oh, we do not announce it out on the surface. We try not to act like it. Nevertheless, sooner or later, we have to choose between fear and faith. Until then, fear governs our lives.

Only, how do you choose faith if you have never met the THIEF in the night? Isn't it interesting that our world surrounds the coming of Messiah – the coming of this THIEF – with dread and anxiety? For many people, “repent” no longer means “change” or head in a new direction – or, most accurately, turn around and head for home. Today, most people think “repent” means “cower in shame and guilt.” How did Satan pull *that one* off?! There is nothing wrong with the word “repent” or with its true definition. How did it get turned around to serve the reverse of its rightful purpose?

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For many people, the thought of “The Great Day,” “The End of the Age” and “The Second Coming” no longer means “Hallelujah! The Day of Light and Love has arrived at last – how wonderful to see Him face-to-face! How marvelous to move out of this veil of tears and lies and decay!” No, it means grovel and cower because the fires of Hell await. How did Satan pull that one off?

You know what? I actually know some people who read this parable in Matthew about the thief in the night and go away from it thinking they do not *want* their house to be broken into. Can you imagine such a thing? Incredible!

“But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched 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 hour you do not expect.” (verse 43)

Jesus is teasing you! Don’t you get it? He is talking to His friends. But He is still promising them that He will break in no matter how well-guarded they think they are: I’m going to reach you. I’m going to get to you. I know you really want me, no matter how you sometimes act – no matter how you sometimes protect yourselves against me. So, “On guard!” I’m coming for you. Let’s play hide-and-seek. You go hide – you always do anyway. I just want you to know I’m going to find you.

Christmas is spiritual hide-and-seek. He came into the world ... and now He is after you – seeking you out. *“You do not choose me, I choose you!”* (John 15:16, 19; II Thessalonians 2:13)

Who is this THIEF in the night? Do you really not want Him to get into your house? What is He going to break into? Your life – your very soul. And what will He steal? Your heart! Your very self. Your whole life ... and turn it into life eternal, which is as much about quality of life as it is about longevity.

Of course that is scary. *Of course* we are frightened by the unknown – by the possibilities and purposes that such a break-in is bound to cause in our lives. But you *do not* want that to happen? Really and truly?! That is not how the early Christians saw it. Their cry was, *“Maranatha!”* Come Lord Jesus! That is what the whole early church was saying to the THIEF. “Hey, don’t fool around on my account. Don’t delay because I need more

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time or have some projects to finish up. *Maranatha!* Come Lord Jesus! Any time you like. The sooner the better.” Only, they knew they were not in charge. It was a plea, not a command. It depended upon Him.

May your Advent be beautifully frightening. May your soul await His coming with eager joy and willing invitation. May you know that it is not your doing – that HE must choose you. And that when He does, it means God’s total love and grace and mercy – nothing you made up, or contrived, or pretended. And most especially, may you remember that He does not come only once, or at the end of time, or in ways that shake all the outer foundations. He comes over and over – in ways large and small – until we ourselves are so made over that there is no break in the comings because He stays with us. I believe He said: *“I will be with you always, to the close of the age, and to the end of time.”* (Matthew 28:20)

But He comes like a thief in the night. He always has. He always will.