

Watch! The Gift of Uncertainty
Matthew 24: 42-44
November 28, 2010

(Alarm goes off)

I'm sorry I have to do this to us, but it is my job as your minister to help wake us all up.

It's not an easy thing to do the Sunday after Thanksgiving when we are still dealing with the woozy after-effects of the tryptophan of turkey left-overs.

Some of us might be moving a little slowly after an early morning/all-day shopping spree on what marketing gurus are now calling Black Friday.

Perhaps some of us took the opportunity of the long week-end to do like we did yesterday here at the church and pull out our Christmas decorations to begin the seasonal transformation of our homes.

And then others of us are cross-eyes after having been glued to the television watching football from the Cowboys to the Texas/Texas A&M and non-stop other hugely important games all weekend long.

I'm going to guess that very few—if any of us at all—gave any thought to the second coming of Christ. Anybody spend time preparing for Jesus second coming this weekend?

This morning, our very un-Christmasy scripture wakes us all up from our Thanksgiving weekend somnolence with a siren of alarm. (Alarm goes off). It heralds the beginning of Advent—the four week season of preparation that Christians have long observed in getting ready for the birth of Jesus into the world.

The Latin word "Advent" means "the coming," and our text from the Gospel of Matthew rings the clarion bell, awakening us to the Advent of Jesus into the world.

However, this scripture is, oddly enough, not about the first Advent of Jesus into the world, as one might think we would be reading, noting that there are 28 days until Christmas.

Instead, it reminds us of Christ's promise to come again—and that we must all be ready!

As your pastor, I always struggle when these texts show up in the suggested lectionary cycle—always in Advent! I like the years when we start the season of Advent by remembering the annunciation of angels to both Mary and Joseph, when we journey with Mary to her cousin Elizabeth's home where the two women rejoice at their surprising pregnancies.

I suppose I'm just like most of us who overly sentimentalize our preparation for the birth of Jesus into the world by romanticizing a babe in a manger while angels on high sang "Gloria," and shepherds led their flock by night.

But we don't get that this year. This morning, our scripture reminds us that for Christians from the very beginning, the first Advent of the Christ into the world was only a precursor for the second coming of Christ. Instead of starting our Advent journey looking into the rearview mirror of Christmas past, Matthew directs our eyes into the murky future when God makes the next Divine entrance into our world.

This is not the usual Advent soft and fuzzy feeling text. The vision of the future that Matthew presents for us pushes us into uncertainty salted with anxiety and fear. Jesus is coming again, and the description Matthew gives us in Chapter 24 is as far away from a Silent Night as it can get.

Now I will say this, unlike the images from a Biblical book written much later entitled the Revelation of John, Matthew presents a second coming when the ideal is to be one of those left behind. Listen to the part of the text we didn't read from this morning—vs. 39-41 "That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left."

Unlike John's Revelation where those left behind are the cursed ones, Matthew presents a vision that at Christ's second coming that the cursed ones are those that are taken away, and the blessed ones are the one who are left behind.

But still, most of us don't like to think of being left behind and taken away at this time of year. Most of us want what the disciples wanted—they wanted the certainty of the Messiah, of Jesus' blessed presence in their lives.

And yet, the lectionary presumes that this year, this is the place to start our spiritual preparation for Christmas. So I decided we would wrestle with it together, because in truth, I do feel like there might be a surprising gift hidden in this text for us—one of the Real Gifts of Advent.

Our sermon series for the season of Advent will explore what some of the Real Gifts of Jesus' birth brings to us. I hope that over the next few weeks, while we're shopping for tangible items to give to the ones we love in our lives, that we also consider what the Real Gifts of Advent are for us—those whose value cannot be paid with a Gold Card or measured in dollar signs.

Our text for this morning is embedded in a larger section in chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew. Jesus is nearing the end his ministry—on his way to downtown Jerusalem and his ultimate death. At one point, Jesus looks at the temple and predicts its destruction. In his prediction, the destruction of the temple heralds the second coming of Christ into the world. God's re-emergence on earth is for the purpose of putting things right—to get the world back in order—to burn the chaff of sinners while saving the good grains of faithful people.

The disciples were taken aback by Jesus' prediction. They got "absorbed with technical details about timing—just as we do today" when we get wrapped up in these "second coming of Christ" texts. They wanted the exact dates, and if possible, the hour and minute for which they could be prepared. (Kate Huey—Reflections on the text from Weekly Seeds—online blog from the United Church of Christ)

But Jesus didn't make it easy on them—or us! Jesus' word of the day is Watch!
³⁶ "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor

the Son,^[f] but only the Father. ⁴² “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

This text really hooks us where we are the most vulnerable. We don't like unpredictability. We don't like uncertainty. We like to know what's going to happen and when it's going to happen.

We're like the little girl who one Sunday asked her mother when Jesus was coming back. “I don't know,” the mother replied, to which the little girl asked, “Can't you look it up on the Internet?” (Joyful Noiseletter, Jan. 2004. pg. 2, “The Lord's Laughter,” Jeff Totten.)

This is one of those things that even Google just can't help us! This is just one of those things—like many things in life—that we just can't control.

And so, this morning, our text gives us one of the Real Gifts of Advent—a surprising gift that really doesn't—at first—feel like a gift. It's the gift of uncertainty.

Why would anyone think that uncertainty could possibly be a good thing? Why would anyone ever ask Santa for the gift of uncertainty underneath the tree?

Mary Hinkle Shore, a Christian scholar, observes that Matthew gives us this chapter from the cosmic and grand to the most mundane images, from the sun and the moon going dark and the stars falling from heaven to workers in the field and women grinding meal to connect God's Divine Work with our own mundane lives. Shore reminds us that apocalyptic literature was always written to people who are suffering from terrible oppression, to give them hope that things are going to change, and change suddenly and dramatically because help is coming from the outside.

So this is one way that people throughout the ages have received this text and the anticipation of Jesus' second coming as a gift. The gift of this text is hope. For people who suffer in this life; for people who are oppressed or abused, this promise that God will come again and put things to right bring relief to their hearts.

But for those of us who are not suffering—for those of us who kind of like our lives like they are and don't want anybody to come and rock the boat—what about us? Shore observes that this text in Matthew is a little different from most apocalyptic writings because Jesus is not speaking to oppressed people, but to sleepy people," for "whether they are persecuted or privileged, they no longer believe anything will change. They imagine today and tomorrow looking exactly like yesterday, and after days, months, and years of such scaled-back expectations, they are... getting...very...sleepy...."

Shore reflects on the way God "wakes" people up suddenly, most unexpectedly, sometimes with good things, and sometimes not, but in any case, the "intervention of god into human affairs cannot be managed or scheduled the way many of the events of our days can be." (Mary

So how's that a gift for us? How on earth could feeling out of control be a gift for us who kind of like our lives the way they are and would like for them to not change radically, if at all, with the coming of Christ?!

One answer would be that when we feel at our most vulnerable, when we feel out of control in our lives the most—that's the time when we truly turn our lives over to God. This is when we learn how to truly trust God, to grow our hope in God's everlasting presence and care for us.

A television program preceding the 1988 Winter Olympics featured blind skiers being trained for slalom skiing, impossible as that sounds. Paired with sighted skiers, the blind skiers were taught on the flats how to make right and left turns. When that was mastered, they were taken to the slalom slope, where their sighted partners skied beside them shouting, "Left!" and "Right!" As they obeyed the commands, they were able to negotiate the course and cross the finish line, depending solely on the sighted skiers' word. It was either complete trust or catastrophe.

What a vivid picture of the Christian life! In this world, we are in reality blind about what really is going to happen in the future. It is God's Word that gives us

the direction we need to finish the course. It is in God's word we need to trust.
Robert W. Sutton.

In addition to uncertainties gift of trust, a second gift we receive when we are out of control is a shifting of priorities. This gift was made tangible for me in a movie that came out a few years ago that you might have seen by the name of "The Bucket List."

It featured a character who was used to controlling his own destiny, and the destiny of others. Then, one day, he was told he had a progressed stage of cancer. He found himself floundering because he couldn't control the disease which was ravaging his body.

However, slowly, the type A controller began to see the world in a different way. His priorities shifted. And yes, while the movie centered on his adventures with another cancer patient on how they lived out their last wishes in life they called their "bucket list," it really was about putting things in the right order—God's order.

He began to show love and receive love. He began to reconnect with family, and rebuild relationships. He began to care for himself in a more profound way.

And though this was not a movie about faith, I would say that for most of us, the reconnection with our Creator is more tangible at such times—which was hinted at in the movie.

I'll leave us with a final word from one of my favorite preachers and teachers of the word, Barbara Brown Taylor, who inspires and moves us on this first day of a new church year, as we long for a new heaven and new earth, but seek to live our lives right here, right now, in ways that are pleasing to God and utterly trusting in God's goodness when she writes: "Every morning when you wake up, decide to live the life God has given you to live right now. Refuse to live yesterday over and over again. Resist the temptation to save your best self for tomorrow." There's no need to get lost in the technical details of timing, or to try to know something even Jesus himself did not know.

Instead, Taylor urges us to focus on how we live, today: "Live a caught up life, not a put-off life, so that wherever you are, you are ready for God. Ours may be the generation that finally sees him ride in on the clouds, or we may meet him the same way generations before us have, one by one by one as each of us closes our eyes for the last time. No matter. Our lives are in God's hands. (Barbara Brown Taylor: "On the Clouds of Heaven" in *The Seeds of Heaven*.)

Watch for the gifts we receive when uncertainty hits. Watch while God makes his appearance and takes hold of our lives and leads us forward, following yonder star, in trust and in hope.

Amen.