

1st Sunday of Advent, Year A
November 27, 2022
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Matthew 24:36-44

“Interruptions”

In our lives we deal with interruptions of varying significance and annoyance on a daily basis. We might have plans for our day, but more often than not our schedules can get off the rails rather quickly when a meeting lasts too long, an urgent email requires our attention right this second, the phone rings, a text message dings, the bus is late, the car battery dies, the child wakes up with a fever, the flight is delayed. And aside from these more common place interruptions there are also those interruptions that completely alter the course of our lives – someone introduces us to a special person who will be our spouse, the doctor calls with results of our lab work, the pregnancy test is positive, the pregnancy test is negative, our job moves us cross country, a spiritual experience at a retreat leaves with a new sense call and vocation, a loved one dies suddenly.

I think for most of us, when we look back at all the grand plans we had for our lives, and then all the interruptions that have led us here to now, we see that our lives are just a series of interruptions. When we look at scripture we will also see that God’s story is also one of interruptions. Pastor and podcaster Jen Evans points out this truth and further elaborates saying that sin interrupted God’s plans for humanity and creation in the garden. And then God interrupted sin and death by becoming one of us in Jesus Christ.¹ Throughout the generations as God acts in history, in and through interruptions in the lives of those who were faithful –

¹ Evans, Jen. “Interruptions” *Parents Take Five Podcast*. February 5, 2021.

Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Rehab, Ruth and Naomi, Mary, Peter, Paul, and so on – we see God at work in ways that are unexpected and often contrary to human plans. So as we turn today to Jesus' forewarning to the disciples on the coming of the "Son of Man," perhaps it should not surprise us that Jesus says God will continue to act in ways that are surprising and mysterious – even to Jesus himself.

Today's passage is located within a larger narrative of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples in the gospel of Matthew. These are his final formal instructions to his followers as he is trying to prepare them for not only a life without his physical presence but also for the difficulties they will face as a new community trying to continue to live in the ways he taught and share this new way of life with others. As with other apocalyptic texts Jesus prophecy about the coming of the "Son of Man" – a term with inextricably linked to the Messiah – is deeply rooted not in fear or terror or anxiety, but in hope. Apocalyptic texts often use signs of future events to speak to the suffering and difficult circumstances of the present. They are a way to speak of longing for God to act once again, to save God's people, and to fully realize God's kingdom on earth. At the heart of these texts are profound and palpable dissatisfaction with the way things are, clinging to a hope that we are meant for so much better.

Our natural propensity as humans is to plan and prepare as much as possible, we don't want to be caught off guard and we want to maintain as much control as possible over our environment. We often want to be perfect and to make sure we get it right. So we have taken these narratives from Matthew, and the other gospels, and elsewhere in scripture to make charts and road maps and formulas to try and pin point the exact moment when the Son of Man will return, when the world as we know it will end and all will live as God intended. Which

is completely antithetical to Jesus' message here as he plainly says that "no one knows the hour or the day, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." We concern ourselves too much with what is not ours to know, and miss the point Jesus is trying to make completely. The illustrations that Jesus uses here of men working in a field and women grinding meal together, and one being taken and one being left behind, while often used to describe some kind of rapture event where those who are righteous are taken up to heaven and those who are not must remain on earth for further judgment, is more illustrative of the broader manner in which God will act. Like in the times of Noah, it will be business as usual, and when we least expect it God will break into our ordinary everyday lives and there we will see God's work of salvation, reconciliation, and wholeness.

So how do we even begin to prepare, to stay awake as Jesus says, to something that is so unpredictable? One of the themes of Matthew's gospel is that of Jesus as an atypical monarch. The messiah came and behaved in ways that were unexpected – in a series of interruptions – born to an unmarried woman, raised in a town in the middle of nowhere, calling men and women to leave their nets, their homes, their businesses, and to follow him, healing the unclean, dining with sinners, and telling everyone about God's upside-down Kingdom – so why should his return be anything but out of the ordinary. Given this, I think the kind of preparation we must do looks a lot less like making sure our bags are packed and we're double-checking we've read the bus schedule correctly than like just paying attention so that we don't miss it! It is a way of life that is attuned to what God is doing and how God shows up where we least expect.

Jesus' discourse continues with a few more parables after this passage, all on this same theme of watchfulness and it ends with the familiar parable of the sheep and the goats, where final judgement is decided according to how one treated the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the imprisoned, the naked, and the sick – those are the least of these in Jesus' name. In the poem – "The Story of the Christmas Guest," Helen Steiner Rice retells and reimagines Jesus' parable, setting it on Christmas Day in more modern times. Now this story for me is only supposed to be told in the Oklahoma twang accented voice of Reba McEntire, who recorded a version of it for her Christmas Album released in the late 80s and was played each year in my home the entirety of my childhood. Some of you though may be more familiar with the Johnny Cash or Andy Griffith versions of this poem. It's a very beloved story for me and my family it goes like this – an old man named Conrad, is alone with no family and fallen on hard times, cheerfully tells his friends that he has been visited in a dream by the Lord who has promised to come and spend Christmas with him. He is ecstatic that he doesn't have to spend Christmas alone and he makes careful preparations, making his home as festive as he can and preparing a meager, but hearty meal for his guest of honor. And as the day wears on, Conrad's preparations and vigil for the Lord keep being interrupted by a person in need. With each knock on his door he expects to find the Lord finally come to spend the day with him, but instead the only ones who come are a beggar with worn shoes and cold feet, an old and tired woman, and a lost child. Each, however not the expected guest, are met with warmth and hospitality as Conrad shares shoes, soup, and a comforting word, as each stranger finds respite and shelter in Conrad's humble dwelling. As the evening gives way to night and the hours of Christmas pass away, Conrad goes to his room kneeling down to pray.

“And He said, "Lord, why did you delay?
What kept You from coming to call on me?
I wanted so much Your face to see."
Then softly, in the silence, a voice he heard.
"Lift up your head - I have kept My word.
Three times my shadow crossed your floor.
Three times I came to your lowly door.
I was the beggar with bruised, cold feet;
I was the woman you gave something to eat;
I was the child on the homeless street.
Three times I knocked, three times I came in,
And each time I found the warmth of a friend.
Of all the gifts, love is the best.
I was honored to be your Christmas guest.”²

The watchful wakefulness that we are called to today, is not solely a practice for the season of Advent. In all seasons we must pay attention to the interruptions in our lives for God is in the interruptions – they are invitations to slow down, to be grateful, to show grace to ourselves and to others, to hope, to be attentive to the ways that God is at work, and to receive Jesus however we encounter him.

² Rice, Helen Steiner. “The Story of the Christmas Guest.” 1972.