

**A God Who Surprises Us**  
**Advent 1A**  
**Matthew 24:36-44**  
**28 November 2010**  
**Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner**

Jesus says, "Understand this, if the owner of the house would have known at what hour 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."

When I was in seminary, I spent one January in Guatemala studying and serving in a small town on the shores of a big lake. We were staying in a guesthouse just around the corner from the Catholic church that hosted us. It was a new facility that the parish hadn't used before. It was beautiful. We had classes out on the covered patio and read and took naps in the afternoon on the grassy yard. It wasn't quite finished though. A couple of the guest rooms had walls made of plywood that didn't quite reach the ceiling. And the doors to the rooms didn't have a doorknob; just a simple latch with a small padlock.

We didn't really think anything of it though. Every one we had met was really friendly and we knew that a significant amount of income was brought into the town through tourists and short-term missionaries. We thought, "Who would risk a bad reputation at the expense of the whole community?"

One evening, when we came back from dinner at the parish hall we noticed that the gate had been left open. When we got to our rooms, we noticed that our bags had been rummaged through. A few cameras and ipods were missing. A thief had broken into our guesthouse. Whatever sense of security we had, whatever sense of control over the events of our trip we thought we had didn't exist anymore. We had been surprised by a thief and surprised by our lack of preparedness and our naïve assumptions. We were left wondering, "Will this thief come again?"

Jesus talks about his coming again as a divine surprise. No one will know when he will come again. The disciples seem confused by this speech because they have learned so much from Jesus during their three years together. Imagine being one of them, learning to heal people, to cast out demons, to pray, and participate in miracles. Imagine hearing the parables over and over and getting a little more clarity about them every time you hear them. Imagine sitting with people you never imagined you would and discovering that they have the same needs and concerns you have about life, and family, and God. However, the longer Jesus is around, the more he talks about leaving and returning sometime in the future. You can imagine how this causes some fear and anxiety, and lots of questions for the disciples. On this particular day, Jesus talks about a new age to come when he will return. After hearing all that will happen leading up to this time, the burning question on the minds of the disciples is “When will this all happen?!” The disciples are looking for security, for divine insight into the future so they don’t have to worry so much. Jesus doesn’t have any answers, just encouragement to be alert and ready for him to come.

In fact, Jesus can’t tell the disciples when he will come again. God holds on to that knowledge as a divine surprise. Yet it doesn’t stop us from being fascinated with the future. To know the future is to have some control over one’s life that otherwise isn’t given to us. To know the future is to be able to plan and prepare for those times that we otherwise wouldn’t know how to. To know the future is to have power in ways that others don’t. Jesus clues us into one important detail about following him in this passage though. Discipleship isn’t about fortune telling or reading signs of the times and thinking we know something magical about what God is doing. There may be times when people gain comfort in that. Following Jesus is much more about trusting that God is in the future than it is about fortune telling our future.

I had a roommate in college who had recently become a Christian. You could say that he was “on fire for the Lord”. I admired his zeal and excitement for his faith and his quest to know more and more about the Bible every day. The thing I

couldn't figure out was why he was fixated on the end of the world and God's fiery judgment. He studied, read, and watched videos that all tried to predict when this would come. And each image of the end seemed to be scarier than the last. He was getting ready. Yet from an outsider's perspective it looked like a waste of time. He stopped studying for his classes. He became eager, even impatient for Jesus to come again. And he became increasingly judgmental of his friends who weren't taking this as seriously as he. Though he was preparing for Christ to come, one had to wonder for what his actions were preparing him. What if Jesus didn't come in exactly the way my roommate thought he would?

God is full of surprises and I think in addition to expecting Jesus to come in glory some day, we are also expected to be open to the surprise that Jesus will come to us in the meantime. We need to be ready when Jesus chooses to break into our lives. We're called to be prepared for the reality that God is in our midst at all times, from birth to death and everywhere in between. Yet it's difficult to experience God if we're not alert to God's presence.

As a whole, I think we're good at being ready. Remember Y2K? People stored up food and water for weeks in their basements in case the digital world came screeching to a halt. In this part of the country we build basements because there are tornadoes. Along the Gulf Coast houses are built on stilts because there are hurricanes. This kind of preparedness allows us to live life with a certain peace of mind. Are we building the same kind of preparedness into our spiritual lives? Or are we walking around numb to God's good and surprising activity around us today?

It's a matter of preparedness and expectation that leads us to be able to see Christ present in these situations. Yet it's so easy to miss these moments. Even as we prepare for Christmas, it's easy to miss Jesus coming in the midst of the shopping, the baking, the stressing over who's going to get along with whom at Christmas dinner. We can be numb to Jesus presence in the sheer volume of stuff that comes at us in our daily lives. We can be numb to Jesus coming and miss the grace-filled surprises because we are simply trying to do too much.

It seems that we are good at combating crippling fear with faith. That kind of faith where we believe that God is present with us just enough to get us through the day or maintain the status quo. But I know God promises far more than that. Jesus comes so that we might have life and have it abundantly. He comes to transform our broken dreams into whole and beautiful ones. He comes to give us a vision of justice and peace for the world that we otherwise could not see. Jesus comes to forgive unforgivable sins and restore the most broken of relationships. Jesus comes again and again and again, to surprise us with God's grace.

Jesus instructs us to be awake to God's activity among us. He doesn't call us to dedicate the moments of our lives waiting around for Christ to come. Christ is always at hand. Rather he calls us to live into the activity of his coming, to expect the holy unexpected. Jesus tells us to be awake and empowers us to live as though the fulfillment of all God's promises might be realized now; that a new heaven and a new earth ruled by God's transforming love and justice may come today. You may see Jesus come as you listen to a co-worker going through a messy divorce. You may see Jesus come in the innocent trust that a child has in God. You may see Jesus come as a neighbor comes home from treatment clean and sober. You may see Jesus come as estranged family members are reunited after 20 years. You may see Jesus come in the midst of a family dealing with a terminal illness. You may see Jesus come while getting to know a guest at the Dorothy Day House. You may see Jesus come when praying for peace in our world that knows very little peace. You may see Jesus come while talking to someone here this morning that you've never met before.

Keep awake therefore because we follow a God who is full of surprises. Christ is coming in glory and in grace. Who knows, you just might just be surprised to be a witness of Christ's coming this week. Amen.