**All We Do Not Know**

A Meditation on Matthew 24: 36 – 44

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church December 1, 2019

Christmas must be coming. We have all the signs…and I’m not talking about the Tinsel Trail down at the River Walk.

Floods and people disappearing without warning. Thieves breaking into our homes. It must be Advent, right? The time for perplexing scriptures that disturb rather than comfort. Where’s the manger scene (with all of its flaws)? Where are the Christmas carols and why aren’t we singing them?? The stores have been playing them since Halloween!! Why can’t we keep this simple? Well, we are Presbyterians, so that may explain some of it…I recently saw a t-shirt that read, *“Hold on…let me overthink this!”* I thought we could buy those and put our denominational emblem on the back. (Although I think you could put most mainline denominations in the same category.) Some people would say that’s part of our problem – over thinking things, but I am thankful to belong to a community that doesn’t take the easy route. He isn’t an easy savior; we owe him the respect of wrestling with difficult texts. We must sort out what we really think about welcoming a savior whose strengths are in his willingness to be clothed in vulnerability, his desire to choose compassion over power.

I give my Hallmark Christmas movie friends a hard time about their addiction. I scoff at their attraction to the endless reiterations of the same basic plot. Someone loses something (a friend, a spouse, a family member, a job, etc.), someone new comes into their world (or someone returns from their past) whom they find very disturbing (they are too attractive, they speak the truth, they are too attractive…did I say that already?) and by Christmas eve, the world is restored and wedding bells will soon be ringing. It’s *A Miracle on 34th Street* or *The Bishop’s Wife*, but without the angst. I tease my friends about their addiction but who doesn’t want a happy ending? Who doesn’t want a world in which the pieces all fall into place at exactly the right moment? Who doesn’t want to live in a world where the biggest decision is whether to open a coffee shop *or* a tea shop in a snow-covered town where everyone knows your name?

Our reality is a world in which brawls break out at Black Friday sales. That’s how we know that Christmas will soon be here. The Black Friday fights have been documented and posted on social media for all the world to see. Fist fights broke out over flat screen TVs and over the last remaining Shark vacuum. Please, *please*, if you are ever present when one of my family members is about to get into a fight over a Christmas gift for me, don’t let them fight over a *vacuum cleaner*!! Another fight broke out over *etiquette.* An elderly woman bumped a man with his cart and he, according to another man who was watching, did not show the appropriate amount of respect for this woman. So he punched him. For not having good manners.

In the days to come, writes the prophet Isaiah, they will no longer learn how to make war. We won’t be longing for a fight and we will be ready for the things that matter. We will prepare for peace instead of war. We haven’t reached that day, yet. In fact, we haven’t made much progress toward that day. We still give gifts that have blood on them. Much like our prehistoric ancestors dragged meat home from the kill, we battle it out at discount stores, bringing home gifts which have been clawed over. And though the child may not know how the gift arrived under the tree, the attitudes that brought it there are passed on from one generation to the next. And the blame is on us *all*, for we have created a world in which consumption is our guiding principle, and for those who live with economic uncertainty, Black Friday might just be the only thing that makes “Christmas” possible.

We watch these fights, we read of the violence that breaks out during Christmas shopping and our hope slips through our fingers. Where is Linus and why won’t he walk out here right now and tell us what Christmas is all about? Why won’t he drop that little security blanket that he always clutches so tightly and embody hope for us? Do we have any idea what it is we are getting ready for?

I read an article the other day about the “best” day to decorate for Christmas. Don’t decorate before Thanksgiving, the author wrote. Let Thanksgiving be its own holiday. And don’t decorate on the Friday after Thanksgiving. You will either be too tired from the cooking or you will need the day to spend with your out of town company or you will need to hit those Black Friday sales. The perfect day to decorate for Christmas. The Saturday after Thanksgiving! Now you know.

I love holiday decorations. I love the tree and the wreaths and the lights. I love getting out my collection of nativity scenes. I love the cookies and the eggnog and the stockings and the advent calendars. But I must ask myself how any of that prepares me for the cataclysmic event that is the birth of a poor Jewish boy. And I must ask myself if I have the courage to meet him here. I must ask myself if I have enough hope to welcome him into my home again. Will everything – everything that I love so much – from the music to the gifts – be a distraction from the truths I need to consider?

Our text from Matthew is puzzling and intriguing. It makes us squirm a little, but we can’t keep ourselves from thinking about it. This text launched an entire series of books, the *Left Behind* novels. What does this mean that two people minding their own business will be separated? One taken and one left? Could it be that the one who is “taken” is simply the one who accepts the invitation to walk in The Way of Jesus? We must continually resist the temptation to obsess over what the end of the world might mean. We serve a loving God who promises to seek and save all people. All. That is enough. That is God’s work. In the meantime, we are always to be ready to encounter God’s presence in our world. That takes courage. That means standing up for what is right, even if it is unpopular. It means serving and sacrificing and forgiving.

Theologian and author Barbara Brown Taylor explains how this chapter of Matthew’s writing carries three distinct instructions. Written as an encouragement to a people who had given up on God’s return, Matthew seeks to rekindle their energy. They had stopped watching, stopped waiting, stopped hoping. They had lost their courage in the face of the desolation - such as the Temple’s destruction – which confronted them every day. In the first section, Matthew reminds us of the power of enduring love. In the next section, he writes of discernment, and in the final section, the portion we read today, he speaks of alertness, readiness. This is how to hold on: *keep* loving, *keep* discerning, *keep* watching.

Taylor writes:

*“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” How do you deal with a piece of advice like that? Well, why not be ready all the time, not only for the end but for whatever the moment brings? 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. Do not put off living the kind of life you meant to live. There is no time for that, no matter how much time is left.*

*Go ahead and make the decision, write the letter, get the help you need, find someone to love, give yourself away. Why waste your time making preparations for an end time you cannot predict?* Live *prepared. Live a caught-up life, not a put-off life, so that wherever you are—standing in a field or grinding at the mill, or just going about the everyday business of your life—you are ready for God, for whatever happens next, not afraid but wide awake, watching for the Lord who never tires of coming to the world.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

I didn’t google “the perfect day to take down your Christmas decorations,” so I don’t know what the wisdom of the internet would say about that, but tradition tells us that we should at least take the tree down before the New Year. I would guess that in most homes, all signs of Christmas are gone before we break out the new calendar. It’s a practical thing, right? And yet the church will always tell time in its own way. The magi didn’t find Jesus until he was a toddler; we manage to give them a couple of extra weeks. That means we have probably tucked the nativity scene away before the foreigners have risked their lives to find the Christ child.

Maybe we should leave them out this year. Maybe we should leave them out *all* year. They may be the reminder we need to be always watching. We can watch the skies, as they did, but I hope we will watch things that are closer to home. We need to be watching the faces of our neighbors. We need to listen to the voices of the children and youth. We need to pay attention to what is happening around the world and in our own backyards. Jesus is coming. Day after day after day he enters in. Day after day we could encounter him if we pay attention. Day after day we could be his compassion in our world. There is so much we do not know, cannot know. But we know this: we know what love looks like: a scrawny, vulnerable baby who bears the face of God. So let us watch with hope. Let us hold on to courage. God’s day awaits us!

Thanks be to God who comes to us anew! Amen.

1. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-09/dont-say-when?code=l15Rcwwu8sdkpkv9c8L1&utm\_campaign=1e77cbd82d-EMAIL\_CAMPAIGN\_2018\_09\_11\_08\_32\_COPY\_01&utm\_medium=email&utm\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\_term=0\_b00cd618da-1e77cbd82d-83882027 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)