

**“The Divine Thief”  
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 27, 2022**

***Please Read:  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
Matthew 24:36-44***

Strangely, Advent always comes at the *beginning* of the *end* of the year. We in the church begin by looking to the end, the very end of all time. Both of today’s texts are apocalyptic in nature. Apocalypse is just a fancy Greek word that means “to reveal,” or to “uncover.” Both of our texts *reveal* something of the ending of time, the ending of one age and the beginning of another. We read these texts as another year comes to an end. All of us hear these texts as our lives move toward their end.

We begin marking time in the Christian calendar in this way not because we have a morbid fixation with death, “the end times,” or the left behind series (which should be left behind), but because time is strange, and *God’s reality is going to bring an end to the “reality” we are currently experiencing*. Part of Advent is remembering that what will be ultimate and real *then* is different than what we experience *now*.

In the centennial issue of the recent *Foreign Affairs* journal, the lead article is, “The Beginning of History: Surviving the Era of Catastrophic Risk.”<sup>1</sup> There are some very real threats that could end human life as we know it: nuclear war, engineered pandemics, uncontrolled artificial intelligence, and other destructive technologies not yet foreseen. The fossil record indicates the average mammal species lasts a million years, and by this measure we have 700,000 more to go, but if we continue to remain earthbound and grow at just one-tenth of the current world population, a staggering ten trillion people would be born in the future. In other words, we should be making decisions now based on what those future generations will really need, not on our own.

There was an experiment done in the small Japanese town of Yahaba around municipal policies. Half the people were asked to put on ceremonial robes and imagine that they represented the interests of the current citizens’ grandchildren. The researchers observed a stark contrast in deliberation styles and priorities between the groups, but the concern for the future generations was infectious and led to creative policies that would benefit future generations.

Jesus is thinking along similar lines when he calls to prepare for God’s future. Advent is a time for us to listen to God about what is coming, what’s on the horizon, and to be prepared. Hud Stoddard wrote a book about the Cuban Missile

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<sup>1</sup> William Macaskill, “The Beginning of History: Surviving the Era of Catastrophic Risk,” (*Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2022), 10-24.

Crisis and how so many people built bomb shelters here in New Canaan. That may have seemed prudent at the time, but I think Jesus is talking about something different. Jesus calls us to be innovative above ground and deal with what we know needs changing to bring about sustainable life for future generations.

In Advent we look forward as a reality check, and we remember the way things *are* is not the way things *will be*... As God approaches us, we will probably be surprised. And if the timing is strange and surprising, so also is the way Jesus describes how God will come again...

The day of the Lord comes to you without warning, says Jesus, like a thief in the night. Paul warns the Thessalonians, “Don’t let God jump you unawares like a thief in the night.” Five times in the New Testament, the coming of God is compared to the intrusion of a thief. Twice in the Revelation: “I will come like a thief,” says Jesus. On this First Advent Sunday, consider carefully. You may like various images of God: The Shepherd, The searching Father, The mother hen who gathers her chicks. But what about the strange imagery Jesus uses of “*The Divine Thief?*”

Have you ever been robbed? Our son Matthew actually caught a pickpocket in Paris, but that’s a story for another time. Have you ever been robbed? How do you feel once a thief has entered your life? The first word that comes to my mind is *violated*. That safe, secure sanctuary called home never feels quite so safe. An intruder has had the gall to finger your most intimate possessions. I had friends who, after their home was robbed, had to buy and move into another home because they just couldn’t feel safe in their old house again. Consider this strange Biblical truth: like a thief, God has sneaked into our world, and will do so again. God has invaded our space and will disrupt the way things are. The Scriptures teach us while we would prefer the *very nice God* of Shepherds or Hens, God has a much more complex nature and being.

Jesus talks about the times of Noah. You know, when we teach our children about Noah, they come home with rainbows and birds with olive branches in their mouth. But if you remember, there was a major flood, a flood that was universally destructive. The earth as people knew it was gone. Evil and wickedness was judged by God. The times of eat, drink, and be merry - in other words, *living in denial, living under the illusion that we are in control* - were taken away. Perhaps this is an opportunity to remember our baptism, and the sobering truth that in a sense, baptism is death by drowning to the old ways of living, to the old self?

God as thief sounds pretty threatening as well. If you think you’ve got your life all sorted out and nailed down securely just the way you want it, beware. You can learn more about this from refugees who have had their lives uprooted and

taken away by no fault of their own. Think of the millions of Ukrainians who have had basic necessities of food and water, electricity and communications taken away because of the war.

Jesus' image of "God as thief" is a sober reminder of a truth I am reluctant to face. What I think I see is not always what is real. And what I think I control is often completely out of my control.

But here's the catch: The surprise of The Divine Thief's salvation, however shocking, is always *extremely gracious*. God tip-toed upon us *in the person of Jesus*. That's why we celebrate Christmas. In a foreign land, on the other side of history, on the other side of the tracks, a young mother bore us a Saviour. He lived, he taught, he healed, he touched those who others would not, he loved the despised and broken ones. He brought the dead to life... Betrayed by his friends, he was falsely accused, tried, beaten, and executed. Jesus died between two "thieves..."

But God snatched Jesus from the jaws of Hell. God's ultimate robbing of the universe was in raising Jesus from the dead! God surely violated the way it all should have happened. And the promise is, according to Jesus, this same God will come again in an equally surprising way, like a thief in the night and at an unexpected hour.

Consider this: Maybe we begin our waiting with lighting the Advent candle of Hope because we know deep down, or at least suspect that God needs to take something from us in order to be open-handed and open-hearted to receive what God offers? Can you think of some things God needs to steal away from you? I can think of some idols (money, security, power, the illusion of control) that have come between me and God...

One of the gracious ironies of this whole teaching is that Jesus gives us fair warning. Although you're supposed to try and stay awake in this parable, you can't. The thief will come at an unexpected hour! So, it's not a simple threat in order for you to get your act together. Nobody should be surprised, *but we all will be surprised*.

On the one hand, there is still time for you to learn who God is for you; there is still time for you to learn what it means to be forgiven, to be loved by God, to be generous. *God, like a thief in the night, will still come at an unexpected hour*. I pray maybe Jesus will steal some of my selfishness, my fear and arrogance, my pettiness and lack of love, my indifference and apathy around issues like climate change and gun violence, or my addictions to comfort food and ease. Maybe God

is the only one who can take away those things which cannot satisfy, so we might be free to receive the only One who can?

I'll never forget Thanksgiving four years ago, just before we moved back to the states, I had the privilege of dining with two priests, a rabbi and two sheikhs. I know that sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but it's true! The invitation was unexpected, and we all had work, but we ate and talked for 3 hours and promised to meet again. We spoke of the need to build bridges and love one another. It was incredibly moving to me, and I was embarrassed at different times because I thought I might start to cry it was such a surprisingly beautiful encounter...

Some people would think we're crazy, but I caught a glimpse around that table of the way God wants our world to be, where we beat our swords into plowshares... and where nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Most of us are not prepared for *that* Kingdom of our God... That seems to be what Jesus is saying, too. Some will not be ready for when the Lord comes again... One will be taken; one will be left...

The *promise is* God will come again and return things to the way they are supposed to be. God will gather together all the nations to worship and honor the Prince of Peace. The *question is*, will we be a part of what God is doing? Or will we remain in the "old world" of us and them? Of hatred and division? Of bigotry and prejudice? Of injustice and indifference to what we are leaving for future generations? Will we wake up and ready ourselves for the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ, and practice the surprising command to love our neighbors, even our enemies?

Welcome to the real God of Advent - whose blessing comes upon the very ones who have no claim on it: the God of the immigrant and the refugee, the gay and the lesbian, anyone who we see now as the outsider or left behind. The surprising, good news is that the God of Advent comes to bless them, to bless us all, if we'll have it. Astonishing, really!

So, friends, the Lord is coming at an unexpected hour. But now is the time to prepare, to say yes to following the Advent Lord, the Divine Thief. Perhaps then in the end, you will begin to live with hope now.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.*