

STAYING POWER

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Matthew 24: 36-44

We have just listened to an account of the second coming of Jesus Christ. You may be thinking, “Wait, this is the first Sunday in Advent. Aren’t we supposed to be talking about the birth of Jesus, not his second coming?” Well, perhaps these two events are intimately related as the initiation of a new era. I’ll admit that when I realized that this was the passage about which I would be preaching, I began to have more questions than answers. It speaks about people going about their usual, day-to-day activities. Suddenly, without warning, one person is taken and one is left. Jesus tells his disciples, and us, to “be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” So, I want to take a poll of the congregation on this question. But before I give you the question, imagine you are in a room talking to your boss, or sitting in a chair speaking with a client, or working with someone in a factory, or talking with someone on the street, or doing whatever might be a typical daily activity for you. Is it better to be “taken” or “left” when the Son of Man comes? Raise your hand if you believe it is better to be taken....if it is better to be left? Traditionally, it has been considered best to be “taken,” just as it was best to be taken into Noah’s ark before the flood came. Those who are taken are the “elect,” and they are taken up into God’s grace and drawn into communion with Christ. The alternative is to be left in one’s own limited reality. So we begin Advent with a story about judgment. That’s where I begin to feel uneasy. Aren’t we all able to experience communion with Christ now? Doesn’t the Christ break into our lives in present time? Is the end time referred to in our morning passage the time when we die or the end of the world as we know it? I can tell you that both positions have been defended by theologians going back to the Early Church Fathers.

Amidst my confusion about what to do with this passage I read a story for Thursday Voices a few weeks ago. Most of you know that Thursday Voices is a group that meets here at Third Church every Thursday from 12 to 1 PM. It happens to be an amazing group of people, and you are all invited to be part of this group. The story that moved me was one by Michael Lindvall, entitled, “The Organist.” The story is about a small country church, the First Presbyterian Church of Carthage Lake, whose last installed pastor left 60 years before, taking with him his wife, who happened to be the church organist. Over that 60-year period one church elder, named Lloyd, took it upon himself to arrange for a minister to come preach to that tiny congregation once a month, which is what they could afford. Over that same period of time one woman has volunteered to play the organ, and the congregation comes together every Sunday to sing and pray and study Scripture. This organist happens to be Lloyd’s sister-in-law, Agnes. She appears to have an intellectual disability, and she

managed to learn only three hymns. She has played these same three hymns every Sunday for the past 60 years. When the visiting pastor in the story comes there to preach, he discovers that he has chosen certain hymns for naught. The organist, Agnes, plays her usual three hymns, ignoring his announcement of a different hymn.

In addition to Lloyd, and the organist, and the visiting pastor, there is one more key character in the story: a young man, Lloyd's grandson, who also happens to be an organist. In fact, he is a very accomplished organist, who trained at the Eastman School of Music, no less, and was serving a large, suburban Houston church. He is told to move on when the church leadership becomes aware of his AIDS diagnosis. He was rejected by his parents, but Lloyd took him in three months prior to the visiting pastor's Sunday appearance. After the service, the young man, whose name is Neil, tells the pastor that Lloyd had asked him if he wanted to become the church's organist, but he could tell that Lloyd was relieved when Neil declined the offer. Neil knows how important it is to Agnes to continue in her role, playing the same three hymns every Sunday. Moreover, Neil is able to play the organ during the week with the church doors open in good weather, and the surrounding townsfolk sit out on their porches to listen and applaud.

But the most striking thing to me about the story is how this church impacts the preacher. Before I tell you about that, I need to say why this story feels so powerful to me. I was recently elected to the Board of Trustees of our presbytery. In that capacity I have come to know the circumstances of a number of small congregations. I visited one housed in a beautiful church but which numbers only about 40 people. They pay their bills by drawing on their endowment, but that will be gone in a few years, particularly in light of needed boiler and roof repairs. The people I met with were a faithful remnant who spoke about wanting to do ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. How do they live out Christ's call to "Keep awake" and "Be ready?" And what does this call mean for us, a church with resources and a mission to be the church, building inclusive community to serve the needs of the city? Think about that while I return to the preacher in Michael Lindvall's story. He preaches on Jesus' commandment "that you love one another as I have loved you." He also incorporates these words from John 14:18: "I will not leave you desolate." Jesus appears to mean here, "I will not leave you without the comfort of my presence." But the preacher appears to have some doubts. During the Prayers of the People he finds himself silently asking God why we come to God with the same prayers each week—for peace, for health, for hopes—though we feel that these prayers go unanswered. Or do they? When the young organist, Neil, goes up to speak with the preacher after the service, he thanks him for the sermon but states poignantly that the small congregation knows the 'love one another' message, and, he adds, "They have not been left desolate."

Wow! They have not been left desolate: with eleven members plus Neil in the congregation, an organist who can play only three hymns, and resources sufficient to have a preacher come in only once each month! Yes, they have not been left desolate because they appreciate the gifts of a woman who has played the organ every Sunday for sixty years with a repertoire of three hymns; because they embraced a young man with AIDS who had been

rejected by a large, successful church and his own parents; because they are an environment where it seems very right for this same young man, an accomplished organist, to leave to Agnes the responsibility of Sunday music and to attend each service sitting in the congregation with his church family because he has been welcomed into that family. As we all know, being church is not a building, nor is it excellence in any activity. Being church is caring about every person in the congregation's reach and staying with that task no matter what the challenges. Being church is to recognize every person's gifts for service and to resist the impulse to make service in the church a competition about who's the best endowed for service. It is about putting persons first. Being church is to bring reconciliation and compassion to the world through the church—through its facility, through its music, through its teaching, through its service, and, most importantly, through its people: all those drawn into its sphere of influence.

The Carthage Lake church had staying power, and I would suggest that they had been taken up into the grace of God. And they didn't have to wait until the end of time. This grace came through their reliance on trust and hope in Jesus Christ. They understood compassion and inclusion, which is an expression of this trust and hope.

And we have it here at Third Presbyterian. It is more important than the building or beautiful music or outstanding guest speakers, because being the church requires alertness to Christ's call to live as a redeemed people. This is not about a specific date for Jesus' return. Indeed, Jesus comments that not even he knows the day and the hour. We must live as if each choice we make, every moment of opportunity to serve Christ in others, were our last. The building, the music, the word preached and taught are great blessings, but they must not lull us into complacency. Look at the front cover of your bulletin and consider what Dietrich Bonhoeffer is saying in those words. Consider where you are looking for hope in this life. We must not let disillusionment with current events or mourning or guilt blind us to the redemptive power of Jesus Christ drawing near. That is what Advent is all about. Our challenge, and my challenge to you, is to stay faithful to God's future, stay alert in the present, and stay persistent in doing good works. To the glory of God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen