

## HOPE IN THE HIDING

Matthew 24:36-44

A Sermon by Audrey Webber

December 1st, 2019 - First Sunday in Advent

Where is our hidden Jesus?

I was talking to a friend not too long ago about surprises. We spoke about how she was not someone who enjoys surprises particularly when they come in the form of parties or within the context of social situations. She is someone who likes to know the location of the event, who will be there, what food will be served, and exactly what to expect will be happening during the duration of the event. On the other hand, I have known many people who are excited to be surprised or enjoy surprising other people. For some of us surprises are a very good thing - I am that person who becomes so overexcited and much too eager about any given activity that I *must* do it now. Surprises are good in cases like myself as I am clueless that there is anything to be impatient about.

On the spectrum of surprises where do you lie? Are you someone who enjoys being surprised or surprising others or do you like to know *exactly* what to expect? In our text this morning from Matthew 24, if you are someone who doesn't like to be surprised, unfortunately this is not the text you want to be reading. And if you are someone like me who needs to work on patiently waiting for events to happen, this is also not the text for you as the balance between not knowing what to expect and waiting is key in our passage.

Jesus is someone who most certainly is a surprise party kind of person. Someone who you can't always figure out, and you certainly don't know what you're going to get from him next. When we think of a hidden and surprising Jesus, we can see that he most certainly was hidden in different ways. In his birth he was hidden in that he was born in the most unusual of places, in his life he was hidden in that he was a rather unpopular person, he is now hidden from our minds when we are busy on a daily basis, and last he hides in the future and we never know when we might expect him. As Jesus says to the disciples: "you also must be ready for the son of man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Our text this morning begs the question, *where* is our hidden Jesus for us today? And *how* can we find the **hope** in this hidden and unexpected Jesus?

This passage comes in the form of a conversation with the disciples. This conversation may be a bit more of a lecture on Jesus' part as he isn't telling the disciples these things to make them happy. Instead, he is trying to guide the minds and conversations the disciples would later have once Jesus would no longer be there in bodily form. This text speaks of the second coming of Jesus, also known as the *Parousia* as referred to in the Greek as coming, presence, or arrival. While a handful of times it refers to the physical entry of individuals, for the most part it refers to Christ's future coming or rather Christ's advent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Tannehill et. al., *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VII*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015, 332.

According to some theologians, we have three options for how we can interpret the second coming in this passage:

The **first** option is the rapture - the time when Christ will come again physically to take up all who will go to heaven with him. In our text we hear Jesus talk about taking someone up while another will be left behind. This option is sometimes used to scare others into faith which if interpreted using exclusively this option could create much more fear than hope, and does not always capture the amazing breadth of God's grace.

The **second** option is our own death - our own physical death when we will no longer be here. Our own personal end time which will one day come for each of us.

The **third** is a symbolic representation of this whole story - instead interpreting this text to discuss what God's claim is for us here on earth. What we can do here and now to act out Christ's call on our hearts.<sup>2</sup>

Most often theologians combine these three interpretations to understand this passage when talking about the second coming or as often referred to as the "end times." Whichever way you go, these topics are *heavy* and are indeed hard to wrap our minds around at times. If we lean into any one of these interpretations, we are liable to worry about any number of things: do I believe that God's grace is big enough for everyone? If I were to die tomorrow have I done everything I am called to do? Am I really acting Christ like in my everyday life? These questions and so many more come up when we consider the end times.

Now you may wonder - how exactly *is* this a text of hope and what exactly does it have to do with Advent? The season we have commenced today. The season which starts our calendar year as the Church. Well, it's true, this text does not care very much about Christmas, and may not be a very popular passage for this time of year. It doesn't care so much about our beautifully decorated trees, our parties, our presents, our decorations. If you have visited my office, the all-important mood lighting with year around twinkle lights are probably not the most important thing to this text. This text doesn't even talk very much about waiting for Jesus' first coming. In fact, it doesn't at all. It cares more about the unknown future. It cares about not knowing the answer. It cares about us sitting in *wonder* and being okay with being absolutely clueless about our future. In this passage, Jesus cares about us being active while also being okay with sitting in the unknown and leaving a great deal of our plans up to Jesus - to find hope in him.

Yes, this passage does direct us back to Hope - hope for a hidden Jesus in our everyday lives. Hope that Jesus lives among us and with us no matter what we do. That Jesus was here, remains here, and is to come. What is challenging then is how do we find Hope in something which we know very little about. We know so little about and yet we must have the faith to dare to trust in something so unknown. That there is indeed hope in this unknown place Jesus will one day take us, and hope in knowing that we are never alone, even in a very broken world.

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<sup>2</sup> These three interpretations are summarized by John P. Burgess, "Matthew 24:36-44: Theological Perspective" in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed., *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

It's not very popular to dwell on the second coming when we are so entrenched in the first coming of Jesus. Many hymns we sing reflect this. Our hymn this morning however which we will be singing later in the service, *O Lord How Shall I Meet You*, written by Paul Gerhardt, is one of those Advent hymns which reveals the importance of pointing to the second coming despite the desire to dwell exclusively on the first. While we will be singing three of the five verses today, I would like to read to you one of the other verses which is not in our hymnal.

Rejoice, then, you sad-hearted,  
who sit in deepest gloom,  
who mourn o'er joys departed  
and tremble at your doom.  
Despair not, he is near you,  
yea, standing at the door,  
who best can help and cheer you  
and bids you weep no more.<sup>3</sup>

I will admit speaking about literal doom is certainly far from what we want to be talking about in such a festive and joyous time as the Advent season, but there is most certainly a hope which Gerhardt imparts about this season which is the greatest hope of all. That we are forgiven. That we have a place in a space which is unknown to us now. That we have a Jesus who although may appear to be hidden at times, is standing at the door for us and is beckoning us to seek him out in places we never would expect.

Now, I am someone who cannot stand not knowing the end of a story, TV show, or movie. It does not matter if it is a good movie, a bad movie, or one I will absolutely never watch, if I know I will not or cannot know the end, I look up a summary of the story, read through the entire synopsis, close the page, and feel content knowing how the story ends. Now you may be someone who *is* content not knowing how the story ends. Caregivers and therapists know this feeling well as they most often do not see how the story of the person they are working with plays out especially if it is a positive outcome. For our story, while some day we will indeed know how it ends, at the moment we have to be content living in this time between the first and the second coming. The theologian, Karl Barth, describes this time period as “between the times” - looking back to Israel when Immanuel was in physical form while looking in anticipation for when this king of kings will return.<sup>4</sup> While this is challenging for many of us, there is something utterly breathtaking knowing that it is our God alone who is planning this time to come just as he planned for his Son to come in the form of a baby long ago. Because of that we can trust that there is something very hopeful to come, and we can have hope in knowing that Jesus is here with us now.

The question then that remains for us is how *are* we to be ready and watchful without planning ahead for this life altering Jesus?

Our passage uses the words ready and watch to describe how we are to be for the future coming of Jesus. The Greek form of “to watch” used in our text this morning, *grēgoreúō*, has

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Gerhardt, “O Lord How Shall I Meet You,” *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 2018, #259.

<sup>4</sup> Burgess, *Feasting on the Word*

many different additional meanings - it means to watch, to be cautious, to be active, to give strict attention to, and to be awake.<sup>5</sup> Jesus calls us to this readiness and watchfulness. He invites us to this strange combination of actions as we sit ready. We are watching for the Jesus here in our lives today while also paying strict attention to the Jesus in and among all people.

We have to admit that we often do things at the wrong time. We are having a party when we should be praying.<sup>6</sup> We tell people that we're doing just fine when inside we are filled with worry and sadness. Jesus knows this of us and is calling us out on it in this passage. Jesus is indeed calling us to do a great deal. He calls us to love others, to help the poor and needy, to care for everyone, to do so much that it seems as though there could not possibly be any time in the day to do all these things. And yet he also calls us to something which seems nearly impossible - to watch for Him. Watch for Him among all people. This may sound impossible and maybe a little unnecessary. And yet it is even more important that we know the reason and the person behind all of our hope even in this world which seems to hold so little hope. Because Jesus does not say *maybe* he will come or *possibly* he will come but the last words we have credited to Jesus come from Revelation 22:20 in which he says, "Surely I am coming soon." Not *if* or *maybe*, but when he comes. Nothing can be more hopeful than knowing that our Jesus has come, will come, and is presently with us.

I urge you to go out and do something. Do something to confront the work to which Jesus calls us. Do something which you know Jesus is calling you personally to do to spread the hope that Jesus embodies. Secondly, look for that hidden Jesus. Where is Jesus hiding? In this season of Advent as we seek him out in the nativity scenes, and in the beautiful words of the old story, we can also be reminded of this hope - that he's out there with *us* and among *us* at all times. He may be in the most unlikely of places. In that person you just cannot stand to be around, among the voices of the tiniest baby or child, in that hurting person, in the homeless person, in the refugee, or that person who we think doesn't do a very good job. Where is Jesus?

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<sup>5</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, G1453.

<sup>6</sup> Sentiment taken from *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible Volume V*, Peabody, MA : Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.