



“GONE MISSING”
SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 24: 36-44
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
December 1, 2019
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Matthew 24:36-44

24:36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

24:37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

24:38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,

24:39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

24:40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.

24:41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

24:42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

24:43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

24:44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

(After the scripture reading, there is a long pause when the sermon is supposed to start. Nothing happens for a few minutes, enough time for people to wonder what is going on and where the preacher is.)

(Walk in from the back of the church)

When something goes missing and that something matters to us, we notice its absence. We do more than notice its absence; we feel its absence.

How did that feel? Just now—that waiting when you're used to something happening that wasn't happening like you expected. How did that feel?

(congregation answers)

I was actually uncomfortable, too. I wondered how you would react. I wondered if you would give up on waiting for me. I wondered if you would be angry when I finally got here. I wondered how long you would sit with this ambiguous, unknown, uncomfortable feeling—Presbyterians don't tend to excel at sitting with those things for long.

Welcome to Advent 2019. A time of where we're called to do something American's really don't like at all—WAIT. We don't like to wait—and we've gotten worse at it as things get faster around us—next day shipping, fast food, instant messaging. We like to get things right when we want them. No waiting.

But the Christian life calls us each year to a different rhythm—while the world around us is rushing and acquiring. We are called to wait, to anticipate, to be expectant. Advent is a radical gearing down—an edgy part of how we are formed in our faith. It's easy for the powerful invitation of this time of year to get lost, to go missing in the hustle and bustle of December in America!

Advent is a threshold space—a liminal time in the rhythm of the church year—we are beginning anew, but the One who gives us new life, is not yet here—things are being made new, even as we wait in an old order, even as we have outgrown it, even as the world yearns for transformation.

We enter this Advent expectation being asked to leave behind something without knowing what exactly is next.

And the waiting itself is required for us to truly get where it is we are going. This part of the church year teaches us that—waiting is a part of the gift.

What is it about embracing God's presence that requires periodic visceral brushes with sensations of God's absence or at least periodic brushes with wondering if God is too far away?

God's very nature is beyond us, even as God's very nature is present with us.

Advent invites us to sit with the yearning, the wonder, the discomfort, with the sensations of missing something we have only tasted, but that we know we need.

While we're doing some Advent waiting together, it's as good a time as any to remind ourselves of some things that are true about what faithful waiting looks like.

Matthew 24 is what the lectionary gives us today.

And Matthew's passage can be a little confusing: People disappearing from fields; People just going about life in Noah's time and being surprised by the flood; Thieves breaking into houses; And Jesus coming at an unexpected hour.

This feels like one of those passages other Christians use to predict the future or to describe the rapture. And Presbyterians aren't really into that kind of thing with the Bible. From our perspective the rapture is just good for a few funny bumper stickers, but it's not something we really believe in.

Rapture aside, talking about the end times seems like a real joy killer during the holiday season. What does this passage really have to offer us in terms of what faithful waiting looks like?

Matthew is not describing the rapture, but the end of time—those are two different things.

To understand what that really means, we've got to get through the confusion that this passage elicits, mostly because of how it has been misused and misunderstood.

Let's start with the fact that the rapture is not what this passage is talking about. In fact the rapture is not biblical at all.

The idea of the rapture came from the vision of a 15-year-old girl, Margaret McDonald, at a healing meeting in Scotland in the 1800s. It was exported to America by one John Darby, a British Evangelist, who took the story and ran with it. It seems Margaret's vision told her that Jesus was not coming back once but twice.

Then Darby started scouring scripture with a fine toothcomb to figure out what this double second coming could mean.

- He didn't find much except for an obscure verse in 1 Thessalonians about "those left behind being caught up in the clouds" and Matthew 24
- Darby never predicted a particular day for the rapture, but he invented the view of dispensationalism—that history moves toward the end times in seven distinct and divinely predetermined chunks of time.
- This idea of history took hold in America via popular sales of the Scofield Reference Bible that was an annotated version of the Bible according to the Darby's dispensationalist view of history.

The American Christian landscape was and is deeply affected by this mentality of dispensations—in fact this view of history and the future is having a dangerous impact these days on how some Christians view things like climate change, US relations with Israel, and even the necessity of war.

And this dispensationalist view also impacts the way many Christians are taught about how we are to engage in the world.

The idea of the rapture is that if you get right with God then before things really get brutal here on earth you'll get a kind of cosmic get out of jail free card and be blissfully spirited away to your heavenly destination while the poor saps who didn't listen are left behind to deal with the horror that God will unleash before Jesus comes back again to really settle the score.

When the going gets rough, the faithful go missing.

This escape clause for Christians is not simply misguided and non-biblical, it violates the core message that Jesus sounded again and again. Jesus followers don't get spared the world's sufferings, we are called into the fray, we find ways to love and to believe and to hope in the midst of the pain—the pain that we tell the truth about. That's the Christian life Jesus calls us to.

But if we take an honest look at the world, then we have to acknowledge that there are many examples of Jesus followers gone missing in the most fraught spaces of human society.

Our Advent waiting should bring what's missing in the way we live out our faith into clear relief.

The very nature of following Jesus is that we are “already/not yet” people. He has shown us the way to live a faithful life—a life of courage and compassion and healing and love. That call is for right here, right now. And the reality is, we do not yet exist in a world where courage, compassion, healing, and love are what defines the world. And if we're honest with ourselves, then we have to admit that courage, compassion, healing, and love don't always define our lives either.

God's creation is not healed, our communities are not healed, but continues to suffer from abuses of power, greed, and violence toward the most vulnerable.

This “already/not yet” defines the life of faith—we are called to live this way of life now, even as we wait for this way of life to transform the world.

Matthew is pointing toward the importance of being ready—it's not about reading the signs of the times, but about living everyday as if this is the day.

Being ready means not needing to know the day or time when Jesus will come again to live the life that Jesus calls us to live right now.

This Fall we opened ourselves up to how the Eucharist calls us to a way of life—and to the question of what is standing in our way of letting the gratitude, mercy, truth, love, and healing of the Table define our way of life.

After weeks and weeks, it is apparent to me that we have barely scratched the surface on these questions together. There is so much more for us to discover, to let go of, to embrace to truly follow Jesus, to truly be faithful people in the world today.

There is so much more ground for us to cover for us to truly be ready for the transformation that God has been calling the world toward since humanity first learned how to harm and to hoard.

This Advent season we will practice cultivating a faithful awareness by noticing what's gone missing—some of the things that structure our lives together will be missing:

- Communion
- Bulletin Image
- Familiar Lord's Prayer
- Familiar Affirmation of Faith

Sometimes missing things startle us awake, stirs in us new gratitude, new yearning for change, new yearning for God to come close.

Advent invites us to sit with the yearning, the wonder, the discomfort, with the sensations of missing something we have only tasted, but that we know we need more of.

Can we stake our lives on a promise that we have only just begun to taste? The promise that God has not and will never be gone missing from this world.

Can we form our lives around a call that we have only just begun to receive? That staying present in the world when God's presence seems far away is exactly when the world needs the faithful to finally show up.

Thanks be to God.