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Advent 1A
December 1, 2019
Matthew 24:36-44

GOD THE THIEF

On the first leg of our journey from Rome to Sorrento we took the fast train to Naples.[1] But the second leg, from Naples to Sorrento, required us to take the local train—the Circumvesuviana.

So when we arrived in Naples, we followed the signs that led us down, down and further down from the sleek bullet train platform above into the lower precincts of the station, until we finally arrived at the gravel floored basement.

Unlike the modern station above there was no air-conditioning down here. And we could feel the temperature rise as we waited with clusters of other tourists and locals for our appointed train to come.

We'd done our due diligence for this route—turning to Rick Steeves' travel guide and noting his warning that this corridor was particularly known for thieves and pickpockets. So we stayed close together, holding our bags and backpacks securely, eyeing each other and other passengers; trying not to look as vulnerable as we felt.

When the old locomotive finally limped into view its graffiti covered cars only raised our level of anxiety further. Because the train was quite full, we cued up to the last car only to discover moments later that the doors would not open, which meant we had to push our way with others onto the second-to-last car, where we were forced to stand cheek to jowl—a pickpocket's dream.

As soon as we could, we walked through to the final car. It was crowded and hot there, too, but at least we could be in more control of our environment.

Slowly the locomotive gathered itself and, summoning what power it could from its aged engine, staggered out of the station.

On a map the distance to Sorrento was 27 kilometers—less than 17 miles—but when we learned that over that brief distance the train would be making no less than 33 stops, it dawned on us that this might very well be the longest ride of our lives.

Well finally, after well over an hour of starts and stops, we finally arrived in beautiful Sorrento, where we spent two wonderful days exploring the town, visiting ancient Pompeii, and climbing nearby Mt. Vesuvius. Then, much too soon, it was time for us to head north again on the Circumvesuviana.

As it happened, the train we took heading north was in much better condition than the one we'd taken going south. There was more room and the windows opened to catch the breeze.

It was a whole different experience than what we'd had two days earlier. At least at first.

[1] A Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal grant enabled this pastoral sabbatical trip in 2014. For more information about this program go to: http://www.cpx.cts.edu/renewalA To reach the blog where we shared our sabbatical experience, go to: http://sabbatical.peacelutheranseattle.org/

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When the man came walking slowly down the aisle of our car, looking back and forth as if scouting for a place to sit, he stopped briefly at the open seat next to Chris, but she indicated that the seat was taken by me, her husband, who was standing by.

Still, he lingered there, facing away from us, as the train pulled into the next station and the doors opened.

Then, swift as lightning, he darted across the aisle, grabbed the necklace of the elderly woman seated there, ripped it off her neck, and dashed out the door and down the platform stairs before any of us could say or do anything.

The thief we'd read about—who we'd been warned about—had performed his quick and dirty work before our very eyes.

As the look on the woman's face turned from shock to tears, her husband stood and took his place behind her, his lips pursed, his jaw clenched, his hands on her shoulders protectively. But it was too late. The damage was done; the thief was gone.

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Are you ready for Advent? It's here again, surprising us (or at least me...) with its quickness. Advent is a season of hope and promise, for sure; but it's also a season of watchfulness, a season of vigilance.

- Last Sunday was all about the 75th, then came Thanksgiving…
- and now we wake to find ourselves not only in a new season, singing new songs, but in a new church year—the year of MATTHEW.

In this season we'll find the Scriptures speaking to us about the three meanings of Advent:

- God coming at Bethlehem,
- God coming today and every day,
- God coming at the end of time.

The gospel reading for today comes from the section of Matthew just before the passion story, as Jesus' earthly ministry is about to end. The topic is the coming of that mysterious figure, the Son of Man. TAKE HEED, Jesus says. BE ON GUARD... WATCH.

Sometimes his coming is spoken of as a cosmic event, visible to all, in which the Son of Man descends on clouds from on high, trumpets blaring, and the dead are raised.

But nestled within today's gospel is another image from verses 43-44 of chapter 24:

> "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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

GOD THE THIEF. Not exactly a comforting image.

Five times in the New Testament, God's advent is compared to the intrusion of a thief.
In Thessalonians Paul writes: "Do not let God surprise you, like a thief in the night."
And twice in the book of Revelation we hear: "I will come like a thief."[2]

[2] Rev 3:3; 16:15

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We may find a variety of images of God in Scripture meaningful and comforting:

- God the deliverer,
- God the shepherd,
- God the waiting Father,
- God the mother hen who gathers her chicks.

But God the thief?! The Son of Man like that man on the train? Like a porch bandit? Just one more thing I have to defend myself against? Another reason to caste suspicions on fellow travelers or to install a doorbell camera?

What are we supposed to do with a God who comes upon us when we least expect? What does such a God want from us? And how can this be good news?

William Willimon tells the story about an elderly woman parishioner who called him one day so distraught over the phone that he could hardly make out what she was saying.

I'VE BEEN ROBBED, she sobbed. SOMEONE HAS STOLEN ALL MY FAMILY HEIRLOOMS! THE SILVER! THE CHINA! ALL THE THINGS MY MOTHER GAVE TO ME, GONE!

He rushed over to her house and found her overcome with grief. Her friends wondered if she'd survive the blow.

But when he visited her six months later Willimon was shocked by what he heard:

> You know pastor, she said. In one sense, the burglary was one of the best things that's happened to me. I didn't realize it, but I had become tied down to those things. I was afraid to leave the house for fear this might happen, which is really stupid when you think about it. Life ought to be more. I thought I would die after the burglary, but I've come to the conclusion that I may be better off without all that stuff.

Could it be that when the Son of Man comes, like a thief in the night, he will take from us those things that need to be taken—including the illusion that we can find security provided we try hard enough; provided we employ the latest technology, and do our research, crossing all our T's and dotting all our I's?

We take out insurance; put money into 401K's; surveillance cameras watch each room; electronic guards watch the door… But then the thief! The THIEF!

The Thief is a reminder of a truth I am reluctant to face. That the loved ones I cluster so securely about me are temporary residents here; and so am I. The things we'll purchase in the coming weeks, whether to give or to keep, will all decay, depreciate, devalue.

Much of our holding, grasping, accumulating is a culturally supported evasion of the more fundamental claim to which Jesus gave voice:

SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM…AND EVERYTHING ELSE WILL FALL IN PLACE.

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The thief who snatched the necklace from that woman on the train to Naples had only his interests in mind—no one else's.

But the God we meet in Jesus showed us with his living and his dying that he has our best interests at heart.

And sometimes, when we find it hard in the midst of our grasping to let go and let God, we may have to release what holds us captive into the hands of the Divine Thief.

Let us pray…

Lord Jesus, you know us completely for you see within us to our very core. You know what we cling to and what we fear losing; and you know what we would be better off without.

Unburden us. Take from us anything that gets in the way of us loving and following you; anything that stands in the way of us living life fully; anything that prevents us from loving our neighbor; anything that asks us to place our trust somewhere other than in you.

As we move through this season, keep us watchful for signs of your presence, and increase our faith in your promise to transform and heal this broken world. Amen.