

Sermon – Matthew 24:36-44
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Grace Lutheran Church
1 Advent – Year A
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“The Thief in the Night”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. As my colleagues, coworkers, and family members will happily attest (or complain about), I am fastidious when it comes to keeping time. If a meeting is supposed to begin at 9:30, I expect people to be there at 9:28. If we’re going to a social gathering that’s supposed to last for three hours, well, when the three hours are up, I’ll be ready to go. And if we’re going to a movie that starts at 6:45, I want to be out the door by 6:00, because we need time to buy the popcorn and get to our seats before the previews start. Frankly, this is not something of which I’m proud; life, after all, happens. Things don’t always happen on time. But it’s how I am. And so, not surprisingly, I have spent most of my life as an Advent purist. I don’t particularly enjoy seeing Christmas decorations in the stores before Thanksgiving. I’ve never much cared for hearing Christmas carols during Advent. And I never wanted to decorate our home too early. Advent, after all, is about waiting – the holy waiting to which we are called as we both anticipate the celebration of the birth of Jesus *and* as we eagerly await the return of Christ in glory. But life, after all, happens. And life happened to us in a big way five years ago. Anders – who is most emphatically *not* fastidious about being on time – was late, quite content to remain in the womb until he was good and ready to come out. So it was that his birth, already a week overdue, was scheduled for the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, the Tuesday before Advent. In the face of my protestations, I was convinced that it was sensible to prepare for Christmas *before* Anders’

birth, and well before Advent actually started, so that we wouldn't have to get everything done with a newborn in the house. And so it was that, in the middle of November, our house was fully trimmed. To help us in our work, Christmas music blared from the iPod. And a strange thing happened: I loved it. I hadn't wanted to be ready before it was time, but there we were, celebrating Christmas before Advent has even started. Oddly enough, it all made sense, as we both waited for *and* refused to wait for the joy of Christmas.

2. Advent is upon us once more, this season of hopeful waiting and holy longing. Waiting matters; keeping time in the right way matters. But into the middle of this waiting comes Jesus, upending our timetables just as he always does. Where do our scripture passages for the day lead us? To the same place they always do on this first Sunday of the new church year. Not to the anxious virgin or the confused man to whom she was betrothed, but to the last week of Jesus' life and his call to be on the lookout for his second coming. His prophetic call is a denunciation of human timelines, a thwarting of the calendars on our phones: "But about that day and hour no one knows," Jesus tells us, "neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." When will Jesus come back? Well, God only knows. So what are we to do? We are to wait, and we are to *not* wait. We are to mark time, sing Advent songs, prepare for Christmas services, and deliberately light candles, one at a time. But we are not simply called to *get* ready; we are called to *be* ready. Right now. For the Lord will come like a thief in the night at an unexpected hour.

3. The other day – too early, I know! – we popped in the DVD of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. You know the story of the Grinch, that green meanie who couldn't stand the joy of the Whos down in Whoville; that shriveled creature with a heart two sizes too small. What did the Grinch do? He dressed up like Santy Claus and, with his dog Max gussied up like a reindeer, snuck down to Whoville to undo the preparations of the Whos, stealing the Who-pudding

and the roast beast, leaving nothing but crumbs too small for all the Whos' mice. While it is no doubt a theological leap too far, I couldn't help but see Jesus in the Grinch. For what has Jesus come to do if not steal from us like a thief in the night? No, not our Who-pudding or Who-hash, our tinsel and trimmings. Jesus has come to steal away from us all that would hinder our being ready for his return in glory. And remember, the Whos are able to see past what has gone missing from their lives, are able to celebrate the coming of Christmas in spite of – *or maybe even because of* – everything that's been taken from them.

4. Jesus, you see, promises to come like a thief in the night. And what do we need to have taken from us? No, not our roast beast; at least, I certainly hope not! Jesus is coming, in this night that is far gone with day drawing near, to take our works of darkness, our revelry and debauchery, our quarreling and jealousy. Jesus has come to steal away our need to do things on our own timetables according to our own wishes and well-intentioned ways. Jesus does this precisely so that he can clear out the clutter and cast out the powers of sin and death that hinder our preparedness for his return. Jesus takes away those things to which we cling most dearly so that he can give us that which we most need: him. Jesus himself, the only thing we need, for he comes with grace and peace.

5. Jesus says: You must also be ready. Not *get* ready; *be* ready. So it is that the waiting to which we are called is not passive, but active. If Jesus is coming to take away the things that hinder and hold us back, why are we waiting to give them up? Go up to the mountain of the Lord *now*. Beat swords and spears into ploughshares and pruning hooks *now*, working for life instead of death. Put aside quarreling and jealousy *now*, seeking instead community and unity in Christ. Live in the Kingdom *now*, as if it is already here. After all, it is. The Kingdom that will come *has* come. The Jesus for whom we wait is the same One who is already here. And unlike the Grinch, his heart has already

grown three sizes, big enough to hold this whole world, even you and me, within the divine love of the capacious God who became incarnate in the flesh of the baby of Bethlehem, boundless divinity made human for the sake of our salvation.

6. And so we wait. We mark time. We do things *just so*, as Christians have done throughout the centuries in this season of waiting and watching. But we don't simply get ready. We, by the grace of God active in us, become ready *now*. We wait and pray and long for Jesus to return, while at the same time remembering that he is already here. The thief has come, taking away all that is harmful and making space in your lives, your families, this church, this world, for the only thing that is needful – the Christ who is coming, the Christ who is already here. It's a funny business for Christians, this time thing. We live in the already and the not yet of the Kingdom. We don't get any say in or foreknowledge of the "not yet," but the "already" is already here. What are we waiting for? Let us take our sin and our shame, our quarreling and our need to be in control; let us take all these and lay them at the foot of the cross – the very same cross upon which the baby of Bethlehem came to die so that you would live. It all seems a little bit jumbled up and out of order, but maybe that's what Advent is all about. Waiting and not waiting. Scanning the horizon for the coming of Christ *and* going up to the house of the Lord right now. So we wait for this Savior of the nations. And we proclaim, against all sense of order, that Jesus is already here. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.