

Hoping Without Expectation—Matthew 24: 3-4, 36-44

December 8, 2019- 2nd Sunday in Advent

I have a hard time with Matthew's Gospel. It's full of dire warnings about what will happen if you don't follow God's way. In Matthew, God is a judge and a punisher who separates out the faithful and the unfaithful. Frankly, on first reading Matthew's theology forms the backbone of the kind of religion I've spent my whole life both running from and recovering from. I am in agreement with American Episcopal writer and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor who says if Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all had churches in the same town she would definitely avoid Matthew's. I have to tell you that I was tempted to skip Matthew this week.

What do I do with this on the first Sunday in Advent? In the season of joyful waiting and preparing for God's coming amongst us what do I do with a story that portrays God as both arbitrary and demanding, like the high school math teacher who springs a pop quiz on you, and yes the mark will count. A god who has favourites, a god who leaves me in fear of not measuring up. Well, I started with the words of a wise teacher who once said to me, the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news, if it doesn't strike you as good news, keep going you haven't found the word of God yet."

So, let's start with some context. Scholars believe Matthew's gospel was written sometime in the early seventies of the Common Era. This was some ten years after the destruction, by the Romans, of the temple in Jerusalem. We cannot possibly underestimate the impact and the reverberations this event had on first century Palestine. The events of 9/11 and the collapse of the Berlin wall rolled in together would barely begin to give you an idea. To Jews the destruction of the temple was unthinkable; the inner sanctum was literally believed to be the dwelling place of God on earth. This historical break in Israel's identity was considered by many to signal the end of the world. Ten years later though you might imagine some in Matthew's community wondering, well when exactly is this going to happen, when exactly is Jesus coming back. Matthew uses Jesus' farewell speech he found in Mark to address his community's anxiety.¹

"When is it going to happen?" Anxiety almost always leads to control doesn't it? "We trust you God, just tell us when it's going to happen so we can get ready." Matthew uses Jesus' words to tell his followers that it doesn't work that way. Control undermines faith. Control places limits on how and where God can act. Control undermines faith because control is always about our own fears and ego and the lengths we will go to avoid facing the fears and defending our egos. Faith on the other hand requires openness. Faith requires us to acknowledge that God is without limits. Faith requires wonder, an openness to being surprised by God's unexpected timing and the unexpected ways that love manifests in our world. It's an amazing thing when it happens, but most days I just wish it weren't so, most days I'd trade in God's grace for a more manageable faith.

¹ *First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Advent 1* by William Loader found at <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtAdvent1.htm>

I think that a part of Jesus' message to Matthew's community and to us during this Advent season is this: a faithful person lives in hope, but when those hopes are tied to specific expectations we get ourselves into trouble. Does that ring true for you this time of year? There is so much hope that comes with Christmas; hope tied to expectations, the perfect gift, the perfect dinner, the perfect family gathering. But then the gift you selected with such care for your child is met with cries of disappointment, that new stuffing recipe is a disaster and uncle Paul causes a scene because he drank too much. When I started training for ministry I had high hopes that God would take care of me and my family despite all the financial challenges we faced when I quit my job and went back to school full-time. One of the ironies of seminary education is that your faith in the ability of the God to provide is severely tested. It's hard to see God when you're busy trying to make ends meet. I don't know what I expected but it certainly wasn't that much stress. At times my hope in God seemed more like wishful thinking.

It's this concern, this sense that hope is unfounded, mere wishful thinking that Matthew addresses in his community. Jesus is unequivocal; it's not a question of "if" but "when" God will come.² Their hope is real, but be ready Jesus says, stay awake, be watchful or you might miss it. This God will surprise you, this God is beyond any expectations you might have, this God lives beyond the cramped walls of your fears and ego needs. Writer Anne Lamott, puts it this way, when hope isn't pinned wriggling onto a shiny image or expectation it may float forth and open like a blossom in spring, flimsy and spastic, bright and warm.³ To hope without expectation is to open ourselves up to possibilities that we cannot even imagine or see coming. It is to open ourselves to beauty and vulnerability that takes our breath away and that makes us whole, that connects us to God, each other and creation.

When I was going to seminary Bob and Eugene were two of our neighbours; Bob often came over to our house with a bag full of yogurts, he did this regularly. Eugene would come over with bread, bagels, and buns. You see Bob and Eugene volunteered at food banks. They brought us food that hadn't been distributed and was in danger of spoiling and would have to be thrown out. On one of those days after Bob left our house my wife Andrea turned to me and said "Have you noticed that Bob and Eugene started bringing us food after you made the decision to quit your job and go back to school, and that we get food from the food bank without having to go there ourselves?" It was a holy moment when I realized the truth of what Andrea was saying. After that, whenever Eugene or Bob came to our door I would see unexpected grace, beyond my imagining, beyond my expectations.

What do you hope for this Christmas? Hope only in God. Allow the Holy Thief to break in and steal your fears, your carefully guarded self, your expectations. Stay awake, stay alert, expect to be surprised and you won't be disappointed. Advent begins, God is always on the way, it's inevitable. Open your heart to receive God—as a baby in a manger, as a vulnerable saviour on a cross, as a neighbour offering a bag of yogurts or a loaf of bread. Amen.

² *First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Advent 1* by William Loader found at <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtAdvent1.htm>

³ Adapted from *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, pp. 237-238, by Anne Lamott.