

YOU JUST NEVER KNOW

Matthew 24:36-44

November 30, 2008

(First Sunday of Advent)

A voice cries in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ✠ Stay awake. Be alert. Keep on your toes.... Make room in your hearts for the One who will come!

My mom did that. Years ago (*decades* really) she got everything ready and made room in her heart for the one who would come. Because Linda, my sister-in-law, was expecting a baby -- the first in our family since my mother had *me* back in the fifties. (The *late* fifties, mind you ... as if that makes any difference.) So she was excited. She couldn't wait to hold the wee baby and just spoil him rotten.

But she did. She waited. She *had* to wait. It was only Thanksgiving and the baby wasn't due for another six months. Sometime in May or June, I think. Which meant, of course, that there was plenty of time to get everything ready. Plenty of time for *most* people, that is. But not for my mom. She started right then, on Thanksgiving Day, while my dad was still carving away on the Thanksgiving turkey!

She brought in her basket, sat down by the lamp, and she started to sew. And she sewed and sewed. All evening she sewed. But she wouldn't tell anyone what she was making. Dad thought it was a quilt, a little blanket of sorts for the baby. It's what we all thought. But Mom wouldn't tell us. Her lips were sealed. She'd just smile and say, "It's a surprise."

The surprise, it turns out, came a whole lot sooner than anyone had imagined it would. The very next day my brother Ken and his wife, Linda, went home to Morgantown. And we went back to Salt Rock which, as the crow flies, I suppose, was not all that far away. But we weren't home again -- in Wayne County, I mean -- until Christmas Day. And home was always the same at Christmas. It hadn't changed really since we were wee little boys. Every year, mom and dad would put the tree up by the big picture window. And they'd hang little angels, and tassels, and wee little apples and ornaments all over the tree. Which is what they had done when we were little boys. And they'd string the lights all around the tree, and set up the little family of carved wooden reindeer that always kept watch underneath it. And they'd set up a little nativity scene on one of the bookshelves. And good old Saint Nick would be there, too.

And in the middle of the room, of course, they have always displayed what separates my family from ordinary, God-fearing, *civilized* people. The old "*kissing ball*" they call it. A hideous thing. It just hangs there all shiny and gold. And if you look up at the very bottom of this thing, which is about the size of a bowling ball, you'll see a sprig of mistletoe. It's just dangling there like goo on flypaper. And when some poor soul steps under the thing -- well, you know what happens. It's just a terrible thing.

I tried to hide it once when I was a kid. Stuck it down in a closet under some old blankets and things. Because some of my aunts were coming to visit. And you know how aunts are. They're worse than mothers! They grab you and hug you and squeeze you and tell everybody how sweet you are. And then they just *plant a big one* all over your face! It's a terrible thing. But it was there every year in our house.

And there on the wall, just under the stairs, you'd find two corduroy Christmas stockings that had hung there for years. One for my brother and one for me. And that's how it was every Christmas. For years ... But that Christmas morning something was different. Something was there that had never ever been there before. ✚ There on the wall beside our two stockings (my brother's and mine) was a wee little stocking for this baby who would be there in May. And *that's* what my mom had been sewing on Thanksgiving Day. She'd been sewing a stocking -- a quilted stocking -- just a wee little thing for the one who would come. ✚

But the funny thing is there were *two* little stockings under the stairs. One for the baby who was yet to arrive, and another little stocking even smaller than that one. And I knew right away -- as soon as I saw it -- that it was for Loki, their Norwegian elkhound. Because my dad *loved* that dog. It was part of the family as far as he was concerned.

But it wasn't for Loki. And it wasn't for Freckles the calico cat. And when I asked my mom who that wee little stocking was for she just looked at us. At Ann and ... at me. And she smiled and said, "Well, you never know. You just never know." And something about the way she said that kind of ... well, it kind of gave me an uneasy feeling -- the feeling that maybe she knew something, or thought she knew something Ann and I didn't. Because we were not expecting. And we didn't expect to be expecting anytime soon. I mean, the stork didn't even know where we lived! But my mom must have slipped him our address, I guess. Because later that spring there was a rumor going around that said Rev. Nolan and his wife were expecting a baby. I mean, this thing was all over town. People on the prayer chain were calling their pray-ers to tell them the news. And I had to stand in the pulpit one Sunday and tell them, "Yes, the rumors

are true. Rev. Nolan and his wife are expecting their first child. But it's the *other* Rev. Nolan, not me. It's my *brother*. He's ... well, his wife's ... Look, I'm no doctor but I'm pretty sure she's pregnant. I mean, that kid could be here anytime."

That same week, Ann (my wife) got the flu or something. So I took her to the doctor. (She drove, of course. She won't ride with me even when she's ill). And the nurse, of course, was my mother. And after a bit she came out to the lobby all bubbly and smiling. And she said, "The rabbit died."

For those of you who are too young to remember or even know about these things, that's how they used to test people who thought they *might* be expecting. They'd take a sample and inject it into some poor unsuspecting rabbit. And if it turned out you were pregnant, the nurse or the doctor or somebody would give you the news: "The rabbit died." And that's what my mother the nurse said when she came out to the lobby that day. "The rabbit died." To which, of course, I said, "Did you try CPR?" But I don't think she heard me. So... I had to stand in the pulpit the *next* Sunday and tell the folks there at Salt Rock that I had spoken too soon.... And our wee little one was born on the twenty-fourth of November. Brought him home from the hospital on Thanksgiving Day.

You see ... my mom was right. You just never know.

A voice cries in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.... Stay awake. Be alert. Keep on your toes. Make room in your life for the One who will come.

And that's what she did. She made room in her heart for the one who would come -- and for the wee little one that no one expected. Because you just never know... You just never know when some

poor rabbit may need heroic, life-saving measures. And if that's how it is with *grandmas* and *babies* and *wee little stockings*, then imagine how it must be with the One we call Lord. Because you just never know when the Lord will come. It may be today. Or it may be tomorrow. Or it *may* be some other day. Nobody knows.

That's what Jesus was saying in Matthew 24. He was sitting up there on the Mount of Olives and some of the Twelve were wondering about what was ahead. "When will it happen, Lord? When will the end come? How will we know it's time?" And you do know what he said? He said, "I don't know." Jesus said that. Jesus ... God's *Son*. "I don't know. No one does. Not even the angels," he said. "God alone knows the answer to that. But what I *do* know," said Jesus, "is that you just never know when the Lord will come."

That's how it was back in Noah's time, he told them. When the flood came. Nobody knew when it would happen. Not even Noah! And that's how it is with the Lord's coming -- (with his *own* coming) he said. It may be today. It may be tomorrow. It may be some other day. Nobody knows. So stay awake! Be alert! Make room in your hearts for the One who will come. Because it will happen, he said. When you least expect -- when you're busy doing what you do every day.

Two men will be working in the field, says Matthew, and all of a sudden one of them will be called away to do the Lord's bidding. And two women will be grinding at the mill, and the Lord will call one of them at that very moment to come and do his will. So stay awake. Be ready. Keep on your toes... Always be ready to do what God calls you to do, and to be the person he calls you to be.

I remember when I was a kid, preachers used to preach on this very thing. “Be ready,” they’d say, “because nobody knows the day or the hour when the Lord will come.” And one, night during a revival at our church, the preacher stopped. All of a sudden. And he looked right at me and said, “What about you? What will *you* be doing? At that moment, when he comes, what will you be doing?”

Well, I wouldn’t be sleeping, I can tell you that -- not if he came *that* night (or the night after that). Because that preacher just scared the daylights out of me, and I had no intention of ever sleeping again! ✕ I remember lying there in bed that night with my eyes opened wide and scared half to death about what I would be doing when the Lord finally came. I mean, what if I slipped? What if I forgot just for that moment? What if he caught me not cleaning my room? or not doing my homework? Or what if I called my brother a big redheaded turkey and the Lord came back at that very moment? **What will you be doing when he comes?**

Well, to tell you the truth, that’s not the question. It’s not, “What will you be doing at that very moment?” No, the real question is, “What will you do here and now, at *this* moment? What will you do with the time that you have?”

The truth is we need to be ready at *all* times to do what he calls us to do and to be the people, the church, he calls us to be. We need to be ready here and now, at this very moment, *in every moment*, to *love* him and *serve* him, and *let our lights shine* in the darkness around us.

For if you keep reading there in Matthew’s Gospel, it’s plain to see that *Jesus doesn’t come to us just once in a lifetime*. And he doesn’t just come at the end of it all. But he comes to us *here* and he comes to us *now*. He comes again and again through the hurting and the

hungry, in the poor and the homeless, in the bruised and the broken, the least and the lowest. Jesus comes, I mean, he really does come to us here -- in the children who are part of this church. He comes through your neighbors, your family, your friends -- people who need your forgiveness and love. Jesus comes to us over and over again.

So stay awake. Be ready. Keep on your toes. And make room for him in your hearts, in your lives, in your world, in your week -- in whatever way he chooses to come. Because you just never know when that will be.

I know a man who is the pastor of one of the big, stately looking churches downtown in a big city. And not long after he went there he started a soup kitchen there in the church to help feed some of the homeless and the street people who were always “hanging around” in that part of town. And they came. They came by the dozens, day after day just to get a little help and nourishment enough to live another day.

And over time, the homeless people started wandering in on Sunday mornings for the eleven o'clock service. And some of the upper middle class folks who came to church at eleven felt really uncomfortable with “those people,” they called them. And one of the church leaders finally took the pastor aside and said, “Do they have to be here with *us*? Can't we provide a special service just for them *so they won't feel out of place?*”

And the pastor said, “Well ... I think everybody should have a chance to meet Jesus face to face?”

“Well, of course,” said the church leader. “Everybody *should* have a chance to meet Jesus. I think they should have the same opportunities to meet Jesus face to face as we all do.”

And the pastor looked at him and said, “Oh, you don’t understand. I’m not talking about them. I’m talking about *you*.” ✠

One of the volunteers in the kitchen said it best. It was just before noon. And the kitchen crew gathered in a huddle to pray before they opened the door and let in all the hungry street people who were gathering outside. And they were offering sentence prayers. And it went round the circle. And then an elderly woman with her sleeves rolled up and wearing an apron said very simply, “Lord, we know you’ll be coming through that door today, so help us to treat you well.”

Jesus comes. That’s what this holy season of Advent is all about. He came first as a baby born in Bethlehem’s stable -- the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And he will come again to... What is it we say in the Apostle’s creed? He will come again “to judge the quick and the dead.” And he will come to you here and now. You can count on it, he will. He will come to you again *today* and *tomorrow* and *every day* through the people around you.

So be ready. Stay awake. Keep on your toes. Make straight in this place and make straight in your heart a highway for your God. It means, “Don’t let anything get in his way. Don’t let anything hinder his coming. So that when he comes he may find in you and in this church both a welcome and a home.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

BENEDI, OBLISB



