

Reflection for the first Sunday in the season of Advent, November 27, 2016

Based on: Matthew 24: 36-44 "No one knows the hour"

This morning we celebrate our first Sunday in the season of Advent, the four weeks that bridge the end of the church calendar year carrying us over to the season of Christmas and the celebration of the birth of the Holy One in our midst.

Will Willimon, former Dean at Duke Divinity School at Chapel Hill North Carolina has this to say about Advent:

"Advent is the season of last things; a time of winter death in nature, the ending of another year. Yet, Advent is also the beginning of the church year, a time of birth at Bethlehem, a time when we know not whether to name what is happening among us as 'ending' or 'beginning' for it feels as though something old is dying and something new is being born." *

Let us pray: Advent God, may the words on my lips and the thoughts and feelings we bring as we reflect together on your holy word, may all of it be acceptable in your sight this day. Amen.

Recently I had a big surprise that I wasn't expecting:

My brand new car was broken into in the underground parking lot where I live!

When I first heard the news from my building manager, I had trouble comprehending that it was my car he was talking about.

It couldn't possibly be my car, could it?

The car was so brand new, I was surprised that anyone in the building had even noticed it, let alone a thief in the night!

But someone had noticed it, someone had broken into it, and someone had informed the building manager who was now informing me.

But, even as I began the work of cleaning up the broken glass, I just couldn't take it all in.

You see, I just wasn't expecting a thief to come in the night and break into my car.

Caught in the surprise of having to put all my numerous ministry tasks on hold, I ran around town dealing with insurance agents and collision repair shops in something of a daze.

I suppose I was in shock at this strange and puzzling turn of events and most especially at the unknown aspects of the incident.

At a first glance, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason for why this was happening to me now, especially as it appeared that nothing had actually been taken from the car.

Then my swim bag, which I hadn't even had time to notice missing, turned up a week later in another part of the parking lot where I live.

Checking through the bag, I was relieved. Everything I needed to use at the pool was in the bag, except for one very important item—a ratty old towel.

Again as I found myself puzzling through this latest turn of events and the question of who would want my ratty old towel, I suddenly realized—there are homeless people living in my neighbourhood.

And for folks just such as these, the ratty old towel I could easily replace from my supply of towels, might feel quite a luxury!

All of this reminds me again of the bubble of privilege that dominates my thinking and my action was more easily pricked than I might realize.

In my neighbourhood, the context where I live, I don't expect to be taken by surprise.

This, in itself is a surprise in itself because *there are signs everywhere* that I need to be alert, take care, and be prepared for all eventualities.

As a result of this experience, I am now a little more alert, a little more tuned in to my environment, a little more vigilant, and possibly a little more prepared for surprising, unsettling, and unexpected things to happen.

Reflecting further on this experience, I do recognize that this experience has connected me with all sorts of hospitable strangers, including my neighbours and various business people encountered along the way.

This in turn, has left me with an overall sense

An overall sense of hopefulness born out of my experience that there more good than bad can emerge from surprises and a framework for what to expect and how to respond the next time this might happen.

Thank goodness, I had decided at the final moment to buy anti-theft insurance from the car dealership where I bought the car.

This was really something of an afterthought but has turned out to be a good thing.

All of this brings me to our reading for this morning from Matthew's gospel.

Perhaps it's its own kind of anti-theft insurance for when unexpected, surprising, or cataclysmic things happen. Or perhaps not.

It all depends, I think, on the depth of care and curiosity we can bring to the reading's hearing and our own life experiences of endings and beginnings.

It's a strange and puzzling story, isn't it?

It's a story full of caution for the need to be prepared for the unexpected return of Jesus who, the passage tells us, might just come to us like a thief comes in the night.

It's a strange and puzzling story as we begin the new season of intentional waiting on the good news of God's arrival into our midst in the form of a surprisingly tiny and vulnerable baby named Jesus in the hinterlands out back of a stable in the little town of Bethlehem.

But before we get there, I am wanting to prepare you in advance that we have three weeks of similar stories from the gospel according to Matthew.

Just like the one from this morning, the readings are meant to encourage and challenge us to be on the alert, to prepare ourselves for the surprising, but inevitable, and sometimes cataclysmic reality of endings in life we are all called to face.

They also challenge us to make way for new beginnings to be born in us and in our midst, especially during the season of Advent.

Like this morning's reading, the stories from Matthew's gospel today and in the coming weeks have the capacity to help ground our awareness of the precariousness of everyday life.

They also provide us with an invitation to relinquish our intellect, our will, and our feelings and to just plain rest for a moment in the sure knowledge that God is promising us God is about to do a new thing, here and now.

Whether we like it or not, this morning's reading also tells us that the day is coming when all our tomorrows will cease to be.

The reading further tell us a day is coming that will herald a change so overwhelmingly dramatic that we will be swept away in much the same way as Noah and all his beloved ones.

First offered to a community of listeners impatient for Jesus' return after his death on the cross fifty years earlier, this story from Matthew's gospel offers his listeners a hopeful vision of how the known world will be turned upside down and in their favour.

Two thousand years later we hear the same reading and it sounds strange and unbelievable, possibly even *unlikely* to our highly privileged listening ears and to our impatient and protected hearts.

The apocalyptic tone of the reading might cause us to roll our eyes, nudge our neighbour, or even think it appropriate to nod our heads knowingly at one another that these end times, these doomsday scenarios Jesus speaks of; these apocalyptic readings are not to be taken too seriously.

Even worse, the dismal messages embodied in this morning's reading might find us feeling inclined to complain to one another at coffee time about such choices for the season of Advent, the time of the year where the days become shorter and shorter and the darkness of night

prevails; also the time of the year when we are easily swept away in the flood of the season's festivities, leaving our faith lying fallow on the sidelines.

And yet, here it is and here we are, once again gathered together on the first Sunday in the season of Advent; and here we are both challenged and blessed with the task of trying to finding something life giving in a passage that paints a starkly vivid portrait.

Not only are we told that life as we know it will end, but, also that the end of the age will come in the most startling and surprising of ways.

But, what if, instead of pushing *against* the text, we were to embrace it as an anti-theft insurance policy of a sort?

What if we were to be intentional about just sitting with the discomfort the passage provokes in us?

What if we were to simply accept the challenging truth the passage reinforces that life is full of unpleasant and unexpected surprises?

What if, for this season of Advent, we were able to commit to trusting in the presence of Holy Mystery undergirding the texts that bring comfort, promise, and a light to guide our paths...

What if we were to bring a real willingness to wrestle not only with these texts, but with scripture in general?

What if we were to commit to bringing the same attentiveness and discernment to our prayer life; to our experiences of conflict, to our habits of complaint, and give them all over to God for God's keeping during the season of Advent?

What if we viewed these readings as kind of anti-theft insurance policy that helped us to focus on our call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus during the festive a season, a time of year that though jolly for many is less so for others?

What if we could bring all our lived experiences of both challenge and blessing, our endings and our beginnings, and give them over to God's care so as to make space for our protected hearts to be revived and restored in the ebb and flow of the Advent season's slower heartbeat, the time in the Christian year when we enter into the sure knowledge that just as something old is dying, something new is being born?

What if, indeed! Let us be about the muddle of all of that and more resting in the discomfort of the good news found in these texts from the gospel according to Matthew this day.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

*(Will Willimon, Duke Divinity School, Chapel Hill North Carolina, www.willimonblogspot.ca)