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**Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

## **The Threshold of Despair**

**Matthew 24:32-44**, NRSV, emended

Jesus said to the disciples, "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, that owner would have stayed awake and would not have let the house be broken into.

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

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While we were in worship last week, as we were preparing for this start of the Advent season, and voting on a budget to fuel our hope-filled ministry and affirming an updated welcome statement...while we were here, news was breaking about a shooting at night club in Colorado—a gay night club. Five people were killed. Two were dancing joyously, but one is gone and one is left. Two were sharing drinks, but one is gone and one is left. If only we had known, what would we have done differently? But we did know. Divisions deepen, chasms grow. It is—well, was, and is—only a matter of time until another person, raised on a steady diet of resentment and hate, chooses violence and victim. Yet, in the midst of the groaning pains of the universe, God steps into despair in order to bear hope into the world.

Matthew's audience knows about power. They know about the day when Romans abducted people from fields and mills, towns and cities. They know the bodies buried in the mass graves. They remember the goodbyes they never even got to say. The warning here isn't about some far-off rapture. It is telling the truth about the brokenness that occurs when power is threatened. Throughout the gospel, Matthew is critical of power and how it is wielded in order to maintain itself. Matthew is critical of the way power has no regard for the divisions caused or the lives ruined in its wake. Matthew is honest about the despair that grows in the wake of power wielded violently. Matthew's audience knows despair.

But, so does Jesus.

Luke's gospel begins with all those joyous pregnancy announcements and is like a Broadway musical with everyone constantly breaking into song, but Matthew's story is dark. Matthew's gospel has a haunting beginning that echoes through today's reading. The story begins with Joseph debating divorce, Mary's destitution is avoided only by divine intervention. When astrologers arrive from Persia, they tip off a mad king who flies into a jealous rage, and whose murderous rampage claims the life of an entire generation of Jesus's cousins. And Mary and Joseph flee with their infant son, refugees in Egypt. Jesus knows despair.

By the time the adult Jesus appears on the scene, we find him always on the threshold of despair - crossing into lives that need healing, loving the lost who need finding, speaking truth that needs to be heard. Jesus, in this gospel, lives with an eye to Jerusalem, and with each step he moves closer to Golgotha. Jesus cannot be pulled apart from despair, nor can he be pulled away from the despairing. Even as he ascends to heaven, he promises, "Lo, I am with you always." To those who are still groaning with the pain of despair, Jesus steps in to bear hope into the world.

At the beginning of the Church year, we almost always begin with these stories that come late in the gospel, stories about despair and utterly hopeless situations. Stories about the fall of Jerusalem and a world shattered by the whims of the powerful. These stories encourage us to keep awake to see the ways *our* world is shattered, to name hope that is being eclipsed by despair, to join our lament—our groans—with those of God's people throughout time and place. These stories beg us to see the places that are still waiting for God's repair. G.K. Chesterton once said, "The optimist looks at the world and says, 'Situation serious, but not hopeless.' But the Christian looks at the world and says, 'Situation hopeless, but not serious.' Christians tell the truth about the despair in the world, the unredeemable, the places groaning in pain, trusting that the God who crosses the thresholds of despair will bear hope into our hopeless world.

Thomas Merton once wrote, "Only the [person] who has had to face despair is really convinced that he needs mercy. Those who do not want mercy never seek it. It is better to find God on the threshold of despair than to risk our lives in a complacency that has never felt the need of forgiveness. A life that is without problems may literally be more hopeless than one that always verges on despair." When Matthew's Jesus says, today, essentially, I know what you will go through, there is a comfort in that. It isn't that you will not face the worst the world can throw at you. It is a confidence that God is condemning the worst the world can throw at you. It is a confidence that you are not alone in this. God is forever crossing the threshold of despair in order to bring hope to our lives.

As I read these words from Jesus this week, about two at work in a field, at a mill, I kept hearing echoes from Ecclesiastes, from a reading I don't think I've ever heard outside a wedding—a celebration of the potential of everyday acts of grace and hope. It reads, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift the other up; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And

though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz, said, "I have learned two lessons in my life: first, there are no sufficient literary, psychological, or historical answers to human tragedy, only moral ones. Second, just as despair can come to one another only from other human beings, hope, too, can be giving to one only by other human beings."

Beloved, creation is waiting in eager longing for hope—a hope we bear because Jesus has stepped into our despair. St. Augustine said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."

Yes, let us witness the despair—the utter hopelessness—in Colorado Springs, the hate-filled violence wrought among those who simply want to be who they are and love who they love. Let us be honest about the despair and hopelessness in Ukraine, and among migrant workers and queer folk in Qatar, and among farmers seeing their crops lost to extreme weather, and under rubble in Indonesia, and in the pollution of Lake Izabal in Guatemala. And let us be honest about the despair and hopelessness that weaves its way into every life—ours and our neighbors. And then, let us cross into it. Let us name and condemn hate and division, and then trust God to give us the courage and to bear hope into this hopeless world. And to have faith that God is with us.

Amen.