

**Matthew 24:36-44
Creekside COB
November 28, 2004**

“The Benevolent Burglar”

My life in crime began when I was seven years old, and ended one hour later. The Short Street Carry-Out had a penny candy display. The owner put your candy in a paper bag as you made your selections. “I’ll take one of these, and one of these, and two of those...”

I played with the Picken’s boys who lived across the alley. They weren’t allowed in the Short Street Carry-Out because they were caught stealing baseball cards and Slim Jims. This is where I came in. Since Mrs. Pickens couldn’t send her offspring for bread and milk, she recruited me. This is where her boys came in. “The next time Mom sends you for bread, grab some candy. Its easy.” Being a fine lad, I refused. The people who lived on our side of the alley didn’t do such things. But under pressure of being called a “chicken,” I buckled.

The candy counter was by the door. With one eye on the candy and the other on the owner, I waited until he turned his back and slipped two grape bubble gum balls into my pocket. The Picken’s boys waited outside. “Did you do it?” they asked. I walked a safe distance and showed my ill-gotten gain. It was a bright, sunny day, but I was sure that at any moment, a lighting bolt would turn me into a French fry. I went home and straight to my room. I loved grape bubble gum, but the thought of chewing it made me sick with guilt. Stealing penny candy is probably how Al Capone got his start. My parents would be disappointed if I turned into a gangster. I returned to the carryout, I put the grape balls back.

Don’t worry about leaving purses or other valuables unattended in my presence. I would make a lousy thief. I have a hard time

opening zip-lock bags and childproof pill bottles without figuring out how to break into your homes.

Too bad I can't say the same about Jesus. Mr. Alpha and Omega, our Lord and Savior, our gentle shepherd and Prince of Peace, is a thief-- at least this is how he described himself. Let's set the stage for this troubling passage. The lectionary scriptures read on the first Sunday in Advent deal with the end of the world as we know it. Everything nailed down will some day pull loose. Rulers will lose their grip on power. Systems and institutions will fall apart. Portents in the heavens will foreshadow the world's plunge into chaos and darkness.

This is the note on which the church starts Advent. It doesn't sound like good news-- not to people who couldn't wait until Halloween to turn on their Christmas lights-- not to the merchants of cheer who want to get us into the spending spirit.

After the resurrection, Jesus bid farewell to the disciples. They had the impression that he would be right back. People stopped making contributions to their children's college funds. No one bothered with retirement plans. Why add an addition to the house since we won't be around long enough to enjoy it? "Maranatha!" it says at the conclusion of the book of Revelation. It means, "He's on his way. He'll be here soon! Come, Lord Jesus!"

But months, years and decades passed. The kids had nothing for college. The old folks had to rely on Social Security. The disciples died. There was no one left who had actually seen or heard Jesus. The stories were coming from people who knew the people who knew him. Jerusalem had been flattened like a pancake by Rome, and the world grew darker by the day and people were scared. Something had to be written down about the things Jesus said and did because it wouldn't be long before details to get lost and memories to fade.

The Gospel of Matthew was written forty years after Jesus' death. What could he say was to people who were weary of waiting? What could he say to those who asked, "What's the

holdup? Did he forget where he left us? Is he lost? Is he teaching us that absence makes the heart grow fonder? We can't wait indefinitely, you know."

2,000 years later, the questions remain. Jesus didn't return in the year 1,000 as many religious leaders believed. He didn't return in 2,000 as the Y2K people thought. Meanwhile, people are driving luxury cars purchased from the royalties of their books predicting Christ's return and the demise of the late, great planet earth. There are others who reconcile Jesus' tardiness by believing in a "spiritual" second coming. Others have stopped believing it altogether.

Matthew's answer to the question didn't seem very satisfying. The best he could do was put two sayings of Jesus together and leave it to us to sort out. "This generation will not pass until these things have taken place," Jesus said, which could be taken to mean, "Sit tight. It won't be long now," But he also said, "Listen up. The day or hour it takes place, no one knows. I don't know. The angels don't know. Only God knows."

The best advice Matthew could offer was "Stay on your toes. Live like today is the day. Keep grounded. Tell Junior to apply to Notre Dame. Go to work tomorrow and ask for a raise. Buy season tickets. Take that cooking class. Live like your life depended on it because it does. Worship. Pray. Love one another. Be disciples. You never know..."

This return of Christ isn't an aspect of Christian belief to be ignored. Throughout its history the church has declared, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Throughout history there have also been those who claimed to know more than they could possibly know. It's as if Jesus said, "Of that day no one knows—not me, not the angels, only that preacher on Christian television who bellars that it won't be long now and that you should send him money."

No press releases will be posted. No appointments will be made. We won't be called ahead of time. Jesus will come like a thief. Have you ever been robbed? Have you ever come home to find

broken glass at the back door and discover that your home had been ransacked? Drawers are emptied on the floor. Your jewelry, your great-grandmother's silver service, heirlooms, the computer, your TV and stereo -- gone.

I recall how angry I was when I realized that someone had walked into our garage and walked out with most of my fishing rods and a trolling motor. I imagined what could be done with needle-sharp fish hooks. I felt violated-- like the thief had walked around inside my life. When it happens, your home is no longer your castle. It is not as secure.

Jesus is a thief. Deadbolts won't keep him out. He can disable the motion detectors. He can crawl through a second story window with no effort. He won't even wake the dog. You wake and feel a presence. Someone is in the hallway. Your heart is beating through your chest. You are paralyzed with fear. You imagine the worst. What you DON'T KNOW is that this thief is different. He isn't after your jewelry or stereo. He's not interested in your "things." He's after YOU. He won't harm you. There is more danger that you will harm him. Breaking into people's hearts and minds got him into trouble the first time he did it.

The thief works under the cover of darkness. Why? He can't get to you when you're awake. You're too preoccupied and busy then. You go to work early and get home late. You've have a thousand errands to run. You pick up the kids at point A and take them to point Z. You crawl through the door, eat some supper, do dishes, pay some bills, collapse into bed and wait for unconsciousness to overtake you. The prospect of an intruder is the LAST thing on your mind.

Sound asleep, your defense mechanisms are down. Now the thief goes to work. I can tell you from experience that this is how he does it. For years there has been a shadowy figure in my dreams. I was always alone when he came. Once I was in a church at night. I saw his outline down the hall. I ran for the door but it was locked. I turned and he was walking toward me. Once he was with me in a strange city at night. He told be to follow him into the pitch black, but I ran the other way.

For too long I thought the intruder intended to do me harm. I always ran away. But he did not go away. Over the years he popped up in other dreams. It didn't occur to me that his intentions were not only good, but the best. It didn't occur to me that I was making his work more difficult, and at the same time, cheating myself.

There is one thing we know for sure. He will not leave messages on our answering machines. "I just wanted you to know, John, that I'll be there a little before midnight. If we knew when he was coming, we would deadbolt the doors, turn on all the lights, and tell the cops to drive through the neighborhood. If we knew when, I'm not sure Jesus would have much of a chance.

Jesus is not a thief you want to chase away. When he comes you remember to say, "Please, won't you come in?"