

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, Nov 28, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE GOOD THIEF"

Matthew 24:42,43 (Reading: Matthew 24:36-44)

I grew up in a time and a place where people rarely locked the doors of their homes. Oh, perhaps if we were going to be away for a few days, but not if we were going to be away for just a few hours. But one Sunday while a family was at church, thieves came through the unlocked door of their farm house and stole their new colour TV. A bit later, we heard of a family who had their Christmas gifts stolen from under the tree while they were at a Christmas Eve party. Soon people began locking their homes.

These days, of course, we're very conscious about home security. We know what will happen if a thief gets inside. Things we treasure will be stolen and probably lost to us forever. Your home could be turned upside down. You would have a sense of feeling personally violated. And how frightening it would be if a thief came in while you were home! So we have alarm systems and lights on a timer. Neighbours watch our homes if we're away for a vacation. And these precautions, while not foolproof, at least help prevent our homes from being broken into by a thief who arrives so unexpectedly.

Let me tell you a humorous story about a thief. At the church I served in Halifax, a man snuck into the church during worship and locked himself in a washroom. After the counters were finished he broke into the church office to get the day's offering. But the offering was locked in a big safe. So he grabbed a few items in the office, like a radio and a CD player and the petty cash box. He exited the church and began walking down the sidewalk with all this stuff in his arms. Suddenly, a police car with lights flashing and siren blaring came racing along the street towards him. Figuring that he must have tripped an alarm, he dropped the loot in the snow and took off across back yards. The police officer began chasing him. A few blocks away the thief was apprehended and arrested. He was easy to catch because his footprints were visible in the snow. Ironically there was no alarm system in the church and the police officer had not been coming for the thief; rather he had been chasing a speeding car. But the police officer cut the chase short when he saw the thief take off and run. Had he just kept walking normally he would have been scot-free. Sometimes a thief gets what's coming to them.

Now that was petty theft, but there is thievery that goes on at a much higher and more sophisticated level. If Jesus were here in the flesh now he may well be tipping over the tables of modern money-changers. But that's a story for another day. Today I want to talk about the good thief. Could there be such a person? Well, in fact, there is. Jesus Christ is the good thief.

In the passage we read from Matthew 24 Jesus is speaking about his second coming. Matthew 24: 42 & 43, "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, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

It's interesting how earlier in this passage Jesus says that His coming will be as in the days of Noah. And what happened in those days? Jesus doesn't mention the wickedness of the people, though there was plenty of that around. In fact, there was so much that God determined to wipe out the human race, save a few, and start again. But what Jesus speaks of is not the wickedness of the people but their indifference. "For as in the 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." The people were just going about their daily lives, doing unexceptional things. They were unaware of God's coming judgement. They were indifferent to the grace in their midst. What grace, you ask? Well, the ark. That huge boat took years for Noah to build and it towered over everything else. It was impossible for anyone to miss. It was a sign that judgement was coming, but it was also a sign of grace and a place of safety. There was one big door open in the centre of the ark for anyone and everyone to come on board. But very few took the ark seriously. They were indifferent. They missed the sign of the coming judgement and they missed the sign of God's grace. And when they finally saw it, it was too late. Let me tell you, God would have left many animals behind if more people had desired to come on board.

What if our big sin is indifference, indifference both to the judgement of God and the grace of God in our midst? Every year Christmas reminds us how God sent his Son to be our Saviour, so that by faith in Him we can be safe when the floods of judgement come. And the words of the prophets and of Jesus, and the events of the world, and the disobedience of the human race, surely teach us that judgement is coming. The holy God cannot let the world stand as it is, with all its sin and evil and brokenness. Yet Christmas comes and goes and nothing much changes in the world or in people's lives. People may pause for a day but

then pretty much carry on as before. They are indifferent to the message of coming judgement and also to the grace that has come and is in our midst. The people of Noah's time knew nothing, though the signs of God's judgement and God's grace were right in front of them. They were indifferent. So it is for so many people today. In fact, some people go beyond indifference. They barricade their lives and lock their hearts to God's truth and Christ's advent. And even Christians can become indifferent to the coming judgement and the miracle of grace which came at Christmas. The greatest story ever told becomes boring to us. We fail to be excited about it or to share it as Christ commands.

And so Christ comes to us as a thief, unexpectedly, surprisingly, at a time and in a way we can't predict. Isn't that how he came the first time? He snuck in the back door, as the babe of Bethlehem. He catches us when we have our guard down. But we don't need to be afraid of his coming for Christ is the good thief. In his first coming grace upon grace was poured out. Literally he came with a flood of grace, which began in a Bethlehem manger and crested on a dark Friday afternoon as he died on the Cross and on Sunday morning when his tomb was found empty. The Crucified and Risen One still comes to us with grace. He comes to renew our faith, to bring us to repentance and turn us toward the living God. He comes to loosen our hearts' devotion to lesser gods in order that we may give our heart to him. He comes to capture our devotion and our obedience. He has come and he comes now that we might put all our faith in Him. For Christ is our God-given ark. He has borne our judgement on the Cross and he is our refuge and safety in the flood. He is the open door. He receives all who come to him by faith. Yes, billows roll and the wild winds blow. But trusting in him, you will not be swept away when the floods of judgement come. You will not be forsaken or left behind when Christ returns visibly and openly. Rather, the grace and love of Christ will sweep you into the Kingdom of God, where God makes all things new.

Jesus Christ is the good thief. He comes as a thief in the night not to make us afraid but to take away our fear. He comes to steal away our burdens of doubt and guilt and despair and replace them with faith and forgiveness and hope.

A man from North America writes about riding on a train in India. The train was crowded and he had been warned to keep an eye on his suitcase because it could easily be stolen. So he tried his best to stay awake and to keep his eyes on his suitcase in an overhead storage bin. But weary from the journey he could stay awake no longer and finally fell asleep for a few minutes. And when he awoke, sure enough the suitcase was gone. But suddenly he felt very relieved. For that suitcase had become a burden to him, and now the burden was gone. He shut his eyes and slept like a baby. Now this may seem to go against what

Christ says about being alert and ready for his coming. But if we rest in him and put our trust in him, then we don't need to be afraid. We can be at peace. For whatever Christ takes from you will be for your good and whatever he gives you in its place will be a blessing.

Now you never know how and when Christ will come to you this Advent and Christmas, but so often he comes in ordinary things and ordinary ways. Perhaps Christ will come as you hold a small baby and you recall how the King of the Universe came among us as one so small and vulnerable. Perhaps he will come as you serve Christmas dinner to a homeless man. Perhaps he will come in some unexpected kindness which is done for you this Christmas. Perhaps he will come as you forgive someone from whom you have been estranged or as you feel enabled to forgive yourself. Perhaps he will come as you sing your favourite Christmas carol or in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Perhaps he will sneak up on you as you leave here on Christmas Eve and go into the quiet of a cold, moon-lit night. Jesus Christ is the good thief. He knows the special way into your life. So let your house, yes, let your life be broken into this Advent and this Christmas. Disable, shut off the security system on your heart. Open the door for the One who has come and will come and comes even now. Let Christ steal away your heart.

Prayer: "Come Jesus, come to us gently and quietly, as a thief in the night to capture our hearts and our devotion, for Your Name's sake." Amen.