

"Surprise!"

First Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, November 28, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Matthew 24:36–44

It is probably safe to propose that most of us are ambivalent when it comes to surprises in our lives. There are the "good" ones like when friends gather around a shouted "surprise" to recognize some achievement in our lives – like graduation, or a promotion, or a new baby, or retirement. There are times when a "surprise" can be embarrassing – like when someone just drops in and the house is a mess; like when you wish others wouldn't remind you that you just turned a corner on another century of life, be it 30, 40, 50, 60, or whatever.

Surprises. We deal with many of them throughout our lives, some as minor as the pastor coming unannounced while you're still in your bathrobe, to some very major ones. "You have cancer," says the doctor and you feel like someone just punched you in the gut. "You're going to be grandparents," says the son-in-law and it is news you've dreamed of hearing for years. "I've lost my job," she says, and although you may have expected it, the actual news still comes as a surprise as you mentally calculate the paychecks and the bills.

Surprises! Yes, life is full of them; has always been, even back in the time of Matthew our Gospel writer. Written about 40 years after Jesus' death, Matthew had to deal with the issue of when Jesus was coming again, as he promised. The big surprise was that Jesus hadn't shown up yet, and things were going from bad to worse for God's people. Mary, Jesus' mother, was almost certainly dead, along with Peter and Paul, both martyred in Rome. Jerusalem had been destroyed by Titus, the temple lay in ruins yet again, and the chosen people seemed to have been chosen chiefly to suffer.

Although Matthew's main purpose was to tell the story of Jesus, he had to do more than that. He had to tell it to people who were frightened and tired of waiting for the Messiah's return – people who desperately wanted to know whether Jesus' delay was part of the master plan or whether he was missing in action. Was he really coming again like he promised?

Well, Matthew says, "yes," but no one will know the hour or the day, for he will come like a thief in the night.

It is that image of God, used here by Matthew in this section of his Gospel called the "Little Apocalypse," that got my attention when I read it weeks ago in preparation to preach this first Sunday in Advent. Isn't that rather a surprising image for God – a thief in the night?

If you've ever come home to find your home broken into, the back door standing wide open and your television gone, then you know what a troubling image of God this is. To have your home or your car broken into and robbed is to feel violated at some very deep level. The idea of a stranger in our homes, looking at the pictures of our families on our walls, rifling through our drawers and personal items, knowing where our children sleep,

violates one of the most precious illusions we live with – that our homes are our safe places, our private places, where we can protect ourselves from the world and all its threats and surprises.

So, Matthew draws us a picture of God that sounds disturbing. True, he said he was a thief and not a murderer, but there is something still very scary about this whole image. Is Matthew saying that God is someone with no respect for other people's property or boundaries? Is this someone who sees the home security sign in the front yard as a clue to the kind of system that he must dismantle?

But the more critical question is what is this thief after? Why does he want to break into our lives? And the answer lies in this story Matthew is telling us about a man named Jesus, for if this thief is who Matthew says he is, then he is not interested in our jewelry or our 94-inch flat screen TV. He is interested in *us*, although since he comes at night, apparently he isn't interested in the daytime-us, you know, the one most people see while we are out doing whatever it is we do in the world, pulled together well enough so that we can pass for normal. You know what I mean here: making it to that lunch meeting prepared; answering the telephone; opening the mail; stopping by the dry cleaners on the way home. Whatever else is happening to us on the inside, it is usually possible to manage it during the daylight hours, if only because everyone around us seems to be managing their lives.

Then we get home, and the children are needy, or the cat is hungry, or the message machine is blinking so fast we can't count the lights. Once order has been restored, it's dark, the sink is full of dishes, the news is on. Tonight was the night we were going to balance that checkbook that hasn't been right for months. When do people actually live their lives, given all the other things they have to do. The evening passes the way so many do. It is over before you know it and you are the last awake. You check the doors and the windows before you head off to bed. You leave the kitchen light on. The dog sighs as you pass her on your way to bed. There is not another sound in the house.

Now is when you should listen for that thief, because now is when he is interested in us – when we think no one is watching, when we think that we are all alone. Why would a compassionate God do such a thing, we ask?

Well, think about it. Maybe God has to come like a thief into our lives because we are so well protected in the daylight hours. Maybe it's the only time our guard is down. We're good at keeping almost everything and everyone at a safe distance from us while we are awake, but any good thief knows that all of us have to sleep. That's why he waits until way after dark. That's why he comes when we least expect him – because he knows how badly we need to be broken into, and how hard we resist all too often.

Is this image for God beginning to make more sense now that we've been playing around with it? But let's take it further. Like any thief, I think this particular one is after our valuables, but unlike your ordinary thief, this one knows what those valuables really are – not the stereo or the silver, but our hearts, our souls, our minds. Those are the treasures this thief is set on, at no small risk to his own life. Who knows how loud we can yell if startled? Who knows what lengths we will go to protect ourselves?

Wouldn't it be easier if this God would just send us a registered letter, announcing that our prayers have been answered? "Next Thursday at six, the Kingdom will come. All will be revealed. Since you will have no further use for anything here on earth, you are hereby relieved of protecting it. You are free. You may let go of your carefully guarded stuff, your carefully guarded selves, your carefully guarded list of things to do. Next Thursday at six none of that will matter anymore. Everything good will be changed into light, and everything else into fire. P.S. Jesus will come by for you at five."

What might be the reactions to that scenario? But I have Raven's season tickets!, we protest. But my daughter is about to have a baby. But I haven't finished my degree. But I thought I'd have more time. Can't I have a little more time? There are some folks I need to say goodbye to. There are a few things, Good Lord, I need to straighten out first. At least give me time to clean out the refrigerator.

Jesus said: "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 not have let his house be broken into." That is why God doesn't send registered mail. That is why Jesus will come back like a thief in the night – so that we do not have time to lock him out. As long as we are successful at that, we will never know what a peculiar thief this really is, who comes not to take but to give. The threat from this thief, you see, is not outside the door; but inside us, in our misplaced fears, our defenses, our busyness, our misguided priorities, our filled-up empty lives.

Keep awake, comes the Advent reminder this day. Keep awake, not to keep this intruder out, but to let him in, because he comes to set us free even though we may not even know we need it. Something to think about in the dark of winter, with one candle glowing to light the way.

AMEN.