

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 24:36-44

December 2, 2007
Rev. Robin Long

36"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only God in heaven. 37As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

42"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Here's the warning--"Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." I don't know about you, but I just sort of disregard this warning from our Savior. After all, I know when the Lord is coming—seven o'clock on Christmas Eve—and many of us will be here to light our candles and sing *Silent Night* to mark the sacred birth. I know the routine, what to expect, what to do. I don't really need to be keeping watch. I know that I'll be so nervous about the service that I'll feel like I'm going to be sick before it starts. I know that in spite of my nerves, the service will be fine—not because of me but because of God. I know that I'll be relieved and giddy as, at the completion of the service, I shake your hands and wish you a Merry Christmas on your way out the door. I know that I'll be driving home alone after the service, appreciating the tiny, twinkling lights on a lone pine tree that sits so far from anyone's house on Rt. 643 that it seems impossible that it would be covered in twinkling lights. And I know that when I get home I'll pour myself a glass of wine, I'll ask Corey how the service went at The Potter's House, I'll kiss Nathan in his bed, and then I'll sit in front of the Christmas tree for a while before I go to bed. I know what to expect on the day that the Lord comes, there's nothing to watch out for—except that pretty little tree all lit up out in the middle of nowhere on Rt. 643.

And as if the day that the Lord comes isn't predictable enough, there's the lead up to it. Year after year we have the inevitable conversations lamenting the presence of Christmas decorations being hung far too soon. Year after year we come to church on the first Sunday of December eager to sing Christmas carols and find ourselves miffed with the pastor who insists on honoring Advent and holding off on "Joy to the World" until Christmas Eve. And, year after year, our eyes feast on the red poinsettias on the altar, the greenery hung all around, and the tall tree up in this corner with its lovely white ornaments that someone at sometime made for something but no one can quite remember the someone, the sometime, or the something but we all expect them to be there all the same.

But you know, I didn't used to be like this. I used to be on the look out. I used to be watchful. And it's because of this passage from Matthew's Gospel that I was. I really believed this stuff—I needed to keep watch because you just never knew when Jesus might be coming back. In fact, I used to wander around our house as a child, wondering which window Jesus would break into when he came back to earth like a thief in the night. I finally decided he would use the basement window on the south side of our house, the one just to the right of the clothes dryer. I thought it was odd that Jesus would feel the need to break into our house, to squeeze himself through a little tiny basement window, when he could just walk through the walls, but that's how my eight-year-old theologian self interpreted Jesus' words. "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." I believed this passage, I believed that I needed to keep watch and to be ready because at any moment (though I hoped it wouldn't be from 8:00 to 8:30 PM on Thursday evenings during the *Cosby Show* because I really liked the *Cosby Show* and didn't want it interrupted by some cosmic event

of inestimable magnitude) I believed that at any moment, Jesus might be back. Every time I went into our basement, I checked that window, watching for Jesus' return. When I was a child, I expected the unexpected. I looked out for the unexpected. I was ever watchful for the unexpected to happen in my life.

As we grow older, it seems that the unexpected becomes something we dread, not something we eagerly anticipate. An ankle that breaks when we slip on a step is unexpected. A car battery that dies in the Meijer parking lot on a cold and snowy night is unexpected. A cold bug that decides your lungs are as good a place as any to call home is unexpected. A daycare provider quitting is unexpected. A pop quiz in algebra is unexpected. The unexpected often makes our lives more challenging, more complicated, and more expensive.

When I got home from work Thursday around 4 in the afternoon, our house was pretty chilly. I turned up the thermostat. Nothing happened. I went to the furnace room and pressed the red re-fire button, the furnace rumbled to life, only to die about 20 seconds later. I called the furnace repair guy, explaining that I knew it was late in the day but wondered if he could come take a look at it. He was there in about 20 minutes. After looking at it for about 10 minutes he came upstairs to deliver the bad news—there was a hole in the burner. The furnace had to be replaced. We could run it on low overnight, but we couldn't stay in our house because of the carbon monoxide. We would need to find someplace to stay that night; he'd be back in the morning to replace the furnace. Thankfully Craig and Erika, new members to our church and good friends and neighbors, agreed to put us up and put up with the dogs for the night. On Friday morning I eagerly greeted the furnace guy when he arrived at the house. Bad news—the furnace wouldn't be available until Monday. So, I called Craig at work sheepishly asking if we could extend our stay at Chez Olvey. Being the generous person that he is he responded, "We love to have weekend guests." And the thing was, he meant it. But, not wanting to impose more than we had to, I started making calls to unload the dogs on other folks. I called Marty Johnson who agreed to take a dog before the whole story was even out of my mouth. This in spite of the fact that the last dog she cared for scratched the native wood on their steps doing some serious damage. When I dropped Ruby off at Marty's she offered to let Corey, Nathan, and me stay at her place as well. I explained that we were taken care of but that if Craig and Erika got fed up with us, I'd be giving her a call. After making arrangements with Marty I found a home for another dog with Jean and Clix Heerema. Crazy thing is, we had just picked Katie up from their place on Monday afternoon after she had been there for a week while we traveled East for Thanksgiving. But Jean just said, "Sure, bring her over. We'd be happy to take all six of you if you all need someplace to stay." A generous offer indeed! After doling out the dogs I returned home in the late afternoon only to discover that, despite the fact that the furnace had been running on low, our pipes had frozen. I called Ken and Marilyn Cerny to see if they had a space heater we might borrow. They didn't, but they extended an offer for us to stay with them. I then called Pauline and Grayson East to see if they had a portable heater we might borrow—they had two and said we were welcome to use them both. I said I'd call back if we needed them. About 20 minutes later I called Pauline back to say we had found the frozen pipe and had the situation under control. She said okay and about two minutes later Grayson showed up on our back step anyway. Good thing too because it turns out that we hadn't found the correct frozen pipe and our water still wasn't working. And let me tell you, Grayson made it clear that he was not leaving our house until there was water running from all of the faucets in the place—a feat he accomplished after crawling around in our filthy crawl space for 30 minutes.

This very unexpected event in our life has been challenging, complicated, and will be expensive. But you know, it's shaken me out of my old set of expectations about this holiday season. For you see, Jesus isn't coming at 7 PM on Christmas Eve this year, no, this year Jesus made an early appearance, November 30 to be exact. Jesus came and let us know that our furnace was pumping poisonous fumes into our home, not in the middle of the night when we were asleep and it was too late, but rather during the day when there was still time to get out. Then Jesus came and said that yes, indeed, there was room in the inn and not just for one night, but for an entire weekend. Then Jesus picked up the phone and took in a dog and then Jesus picked up again and said he'd take another dog. Then Jesus showed up at the door and made himself at home in our crawl space, fixing our pipes while he was there.

Jesus came to Maple City early this year. I wasn't really watching for him, but he was there nonetheless, exceeding my expectations.

And here he is again, at this table, ready to sit down for a meal with us: ready to listen to us, comfort us, abide with us, save us, and love us. Ready to exceed our expectations and make even the most challenging unexpected events of this life an opportunity to experience grace, love, and extravagant hospitality. Thanks be to God for the unexpected, thanks be to God for the mystery of the miracle of being part of the family of Christ. Now, in the presence of the Christ who is here at this table and who is here in the presence of each of us, let us feast together and celebrate this holy meal.