

**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**November 28, 2010 (First Sunday of Advent)**  
**Matthew 24:36-44**  
**“Unexpected Hours”**

A man was walking on a hilltop outside a city as the day was drawing to a close, when he encountered another man coming toward him from the opposite direction. Both were carrying small books and seemed energized by something they had just read. When the two stood face to face, the first man lifted his book and said, “A short poem by Robert Frost titled *On Looking Up By Chance At the Constellations*:

You’ll wait a long, long time for anything much  
To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud  
And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.  
The sun and moon get crossed, but they never touch,  
Nor strike out fire from each other nor crash out loud.  
The planets seem to interfere in their curves –  
But nothing ever happens, no harm is done.  
We may as well go patiently on with our life,  
And look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun  
For the shocks and changes we need to keep us sane.  
It is true the longest drought will end in rain,  
The longest peace in China will end in strife.  
Still it wouldn’t reward the watcher to stay awake  
In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break  
On his particular time and personal sight.  
That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.

The second man waited for a moment and then said, “A short passage from the Gospel of Matthew: *“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...Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”* Struck by the contrast between their selections, each repeated the final line for added emphasis: “That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.” “The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Unsure what should be spoken to resolve this impasse, the two men fell silent and looked over to the horizon at the city below them. Both saw streets organized in a careful grid of perpendicular rows, and tall buildings looking solid and permanent as if carved out of stone – which many of them actually were. Yet moving over those streets were cars and buses, and people were there, busy in their activity, seldom stopping as they rushed around noting that November was almost gone and December would soon be here. Permanence and calm; movement and anxiety – what you saw depended on what you looked for.

But both men looked at the same thing – the same panorama, the same city, and toward the same horizon – and yet they were focused on two different things. Was this caused by something as simple as a clash between science and religion, between

reason and faith? For a moment it seemed that way. The first man flipped pages in his book, and then carefully choosing lines with a bony, outstretched, reading finger, he spoke again: *Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler...Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.* The second man scowled and extending his own bony reading finger moved up the text a bit and read: *As the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. As in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,...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 clash of viewpoints seemed so predictable, as predestined as if two mules walking in opposite directions along a narrow path had come head to head and now both stubborn beasts refused to yield. The first man flipped pages again and then, indicating a phrase with his angry finger, turned the book so the other man could read the line: *“Good fences make good neighbors.”* The second man did the same with his sacred text, jabbing at a verse and spinning the book around so the other could read: *Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

In truth, it was getting harder to read the printed words, for the sun had set beneath the horizon. Somewhere down below a siren’s distant wail could be heard, and though still holding their books, the two men turned to see if they could spot the flashing lights and perhaps understand the emergency to which the lights were responding. One thought: Was it, God forbid, a shooting? Was it a car crash, a fire or a bomb set off by a terrorist? The other thought, Was it, heaven forbid, a natural disaster? Was it a tornado, a spill of toxic waste into the water supply, or a missile attack that meant the country was now at war? Were their families at risk? Were innocent lives in danger? The simultaneous thoughts, despite coming from two different sources, became more and more similar in tone as the sound of the siren below reminded the men of their shared humanity and common desire for the well-being of those in the city below.

Was it inevitable that the two must disagree? For so long it had certainly seemed so. Based on the mass media of daily life, there was a lot of money to be made in opposing viewpoints – FOX News vs. MSNBC. There were larger political harvests to be reaped by policies of saying “No” rather than compromises that allow for “Yes” answers. But still the sirens echo down the city streets. Still the hungry lack food, the thirsty lack water, the strangers are not welcomed, the naked have no clothing, the sick are not tended to, the prisoners are not visited. The needs are so self-evident. The sirens far too regularly break the silence of the sunset hours.

To seek out a common place for two different perspectives requires taking a step back, figuratively, into a posture of humility. When the two men looked at each other again, and noticed that they were still standing with fingers pointing at confrontational phrases, the second man took the first man’s book of Frost’s poems; and in place of the closing line from *Mending Wall* that says, “Good fences make good neighbors,” he pointed to the opening line from the poem: *“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”* Likewise the first man took the second man’s Gospel of Matthew and pointed to the first verse

from the passage in chapter 24: *“About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*

In that act of humility and mutuality came a moment of convergence. The world in which we live is marked by a dance between permanence and change. The constellations are over our heads, as they have been for centuries, but they are constantly in motion, ever changing. So, is the grand drama of life unscripted – simply chance and fate and inexorable natural laws unfolding? Does the drama have a conclusion – a final curtain that falls unexpectedly only to rise again upon a transformed stage with transformed actors?

Both the scientist and the believer encounter the world with a sense of awe, for there is much to admire and much to wonder about. There is also much that worries us, which is why we look for answers as well as reassurance. The first Frost poem ended with the lines *“It wouldn’t reward the watcher to stay awake/ In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break/ On his particular time and personal sight. That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.”* Those words are spoken because we are anxious about the future. We wonder: Will there be war that touches our soil and our homes? Will there be violence that reaches our doorstep or hunger that gnaws at our belly? That is why we want someone to reassuringly say, “the calm is safe to last for tonight.”

Likewise the last line of the Matthew passage speaks about the Son of Man “coming at an unexpected hour.” But what is “an unexpected hour”? It isn’t an hour chosen intentionally to surprise or chosen maliciously to arrive at the worst possible moment. No, it is unexpected because it is not where our attention is focused. The people of Noah’s time were not condemned for eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage; they were simply busy, just as we are busy. They were distracted and self-focused just as we are distracted and self-absorbed. What’s to be done, then? We know it is false comfort to be told that the calm will always, ever and ever, last, for all things change. And we know it is false faith to claim to know the precise details and timetables about the coming realm of God, for we really don’t. So we step back a bit. We let Matthew remind us that we aren’t supposed to have all the answers, since only God the Creator knows about that final day and hour.” And we read Robert Frost and trust that we are not supposed to raise up barricades and fight over this issue, since “something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

The season of Advent, and its talk about God’s promised reign of glory and peace, is meant to prod us with a sense of urgency. Earthly time does not passively unfold, but rather moves along a path shaped by God. So peace must be pursued. Poverty must be confronted. And war simply must not be. But this season is not about urgency shaped by fear. The one who is coming has already arrived. It is not about an apocalyptic, end-of-the-world nightmare filling the evening sky; it is more like the birth of a child who has been growing within, a womb finally releasing its wonder. So we hold our texts in our hands and point to the words that make the most sense to us; but in one way, the larger message is the same: Life is precious and worthy of being protected. Act now so all may be made whole. And when a gospel text is held in your hand and humbly shared

with others, then the call can be grounded upon words of hope: God wants to come, ever again, into creation. God wants to come, ever again, into creation.<sup>1</sup>

Two men met on a hilltop over a city, each reading their own book until at some point they paused and exchanged books and then looked again at the horizon. You decide what happened next. Did they keep each other's books? Did they walk on together? God knows. Our world will be transformed in unexpected ways, in unexpected places, in unexpected hours – which, by faith, is paradoxically, miraculously, exactly what we expect to happen. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> John Workman, *Fireflies in a Fruit Jar*, pp. 114-115.