

**Lexington Presbyterian Church**  
**Lexington, Virginia**  
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*Gifts Before Christmas*  
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There is a Peanuts comic strip in which Linus is listening carefully as his sister, Lucy, boasts about her religious faith and her potential as an evangelist.

She says to Linus, "I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion."

Linus asks, "How did you do that?"

Lucy replies, "I hit him with my lunch box!"

When you were in second or third grade did you ever—do you remember—did you ever have your teacher say, "I have to go down to the principal's office for two minutes. I'm going to leave the door open and Mrs. So and So across the hall will be listening? You be good and quiet and do your work. I'll be right back!" I remember vividly, because I hated it. I hated it when she would make the teacher's pet the tattletale. And I definitely was not the teacher's pet. Still, sometimes we were reasonably quiet. Sometimes maybe we weren't.

In high school it was a little different. It could be that when a teacher left the room it would get noisy, or things might be thrown around the room, maybe someone's lunch or some girl's books.

Then there was college. When classes changed and students filed into a classroom the teacher would sometimes be there waiting. But sometimes we would have to wait for the teacher to come. It could get very interesting if the teacher's coming was delayed more than a minute or two. We would think, "Maybe he or she isn't coming at all!" What was it, if the professor didn't show after 10 minutes, you were free to leave, or was it 15 minutes?

Our Gospel passage from Mark is a little like that. We see it from our point of view: this side of the cross. It is a little frightening—these passages about the Lord's Coming. God has said, "I'll be right back—you be good and do your work!" God has left the room in charge of the learners. The actual words from the Gospel are: "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work (to do)..(Mark 13:34)."

Do you think God ever wonders how faithful we will be? Do you think God has made a mistake to trust us so much? In Luke 18:8 Jesus asks what seems a wistful question, "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Will we say, "The teacher is late today—we can do whatever we want?"

In many ways, it seems that that is exactly what this world is doing.

The more I read about it the more I am impressed about how much our culture today resembles the early 18th century—not in terms of technology or creature comforts, but in spiritual poverty and violence and utter insensitivity to God and kindness. They had rampant gambling; we have rampant gambling, legal and illegal. They had bull-baiting and cock-fighting—I think we probably have some of that here as well. It almost seems like chaos is going to be reigning when Jesus returns.

Two statements stand out to me in our Gospel lesson from Mark, both statements from the same sentence, (v. 31) Jesus says, first “heaven and earth will pass away.” Isn't that encouraging news? “Heaven and earth will pass away?” You may say, I don't know much about that right now, but my employer has sold out and I don't have a job and I don't have money—and I do have bills to pay!

“Heaven and earth will pass away?” You may say I don't know about that right now but people I really trusted have let me down. I hurt, and I hurt a lot! Where are you when I need you, God?

“Heaven and earth will pass away?”

But Jesus also says, My words—what I am telling you right now—will not pass away! Jesus says, “Trust Me! I am making you a promise! I'm coming back! I won't leave you without resources! I'm leaving you in charge! Each of you has his or her work to do! So stay at the job! Don't give up! I'll be back!”

*The promise of an enduring validity for Jesus' words recasts the promise of eternal rule made in Daniel 7:14, To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. Jesus' word is identified with God's Word. Taken as an independent saying, the claim that Jesus' word is eternal also makes a Christological assertion about Jesus: He is greater than the prophets who deliver God's word to the people. (NIB p. 693).*

What do we do? How do we apply Jesus' words?

Living some two millennia after these words were spoken, many Christians today assume that the word about watchfulness has no significance for them. Yet we all know, sometimes too well, that human life is fleeting. A young man is murdered on the streets of a large city merely for asking some youths why they were verbally tormenting an elderly man. A young woman goes to pick up her infant from a nap and discovers that he died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Such stories remind us that we should be watchful as Christians.

What do we do?

First, we keep our eyes and our ears open! God cares! Then, comfort one another—because God may be using you, even as you hurt, to bring God's love to someone else. Don't refuse to be God's instrument of healing.

Paul says that because of the grace of God, we are not lacking in any spiritual gift that we need as we wait for our Lord to reveal Himself. Even though heaven and earth are passing away, God gives us resources to hold steady as we await Christ's coming.

Those gifts include love. Not love in the abstract—but the tender love of God for each of us! And that love is reflected in the Body of Christ. Those gifts include strength! The promise is "As your day, so shall your strength be!" Those gifts also include, God's Spirit! God's presence! Yes, our Lord went away—but He is very much with us because he has sent us the Holy Spirit, to comfort us!

I know this seems like a funny way to approach Christmas—with words about heaven and earth passing away. Is it right to approach this time of the year with messages of the end of time, and of the Day of the Lord? Perhaps . . . during these times of stress and anxiety amidst a pandemic.

Of course, we all have a love/hate relationship with surprise. On the one hand, the every-minute-scheduled sameness of our lives drives us crazy. An 8-to-5 job combined with the 5-to-11 demands of our families leaves little time for spontaneity or adventure or surprise.

We try to compensate. Sports events remain high on our list of activities partly because, despite all the statistics and league records, we still never really know what's going to happen and who's going to win.

Yet we also hate surprises -- and do our best to insulate our lives from the unexpected and uncontrolled. Consider our addiction to security systems -- for our homes, our offices, our automobiles. Most operate by letting off a screeching siren when they have been breached. Think about it. Security systems don't protect us from attack, or robbery. They don't incapacitate the intruder in any way. What they do is to take away the element of surprise. We know someone has broken in; we know there is an unexpected presence in our home or car or business.

It used to be socially acceptable to just "drop by" someone's house for a visit -- unexpected callers were as welcome and refreshing as a spring shower. Now, however, a more appropriate analogy might compare the unannounced visitor with a typhoon -- something you surely don't want on your doorstep, no matter how drought-stricken you might be.

The gospel text this week reminds us that, as we are now entering Advent -- the Season of Surprise -- we had better be on our toes. Our God is a surprising God, who has acted in surprising, unpredictable ways since the creation of Adam. Advent is a time to prepare for the miraculous birth of Christ into our world -- but from year to year we can never really predict just when that event will occur for us in our own lives. Christ does not enter the world at the stroke of midnight on December 25. If you think you have a sure handle on the "day" and "hour" of Christ's arrival, you can pretty much count on the fact that you are wrong.

"I hope I'm not intruding." How many times have we heard or said these words? We don't usually like to take people by surprise, or to interrupt their settled plans and processes. But there are moments in life when a Christian is called to intrude and to keep intruding. Why?

Because we have an intrusive God. Indeed, Jesus the Christ was the biggest intruder in all of history. His birth, the Word made flesh, was The Great Intrusion -- of eternal into the temporal, the divine into the human, the spiritual into the material. The entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, testifies to the power of an intrusive God to break into our lives with the news of God's amazing grace and love.

Jesus' final example in today's gospel lesson, notes that when the master left on his journey, he assigned his servants specific tasks to carry out while he was gone. As Christians, as disciples of Christ, we too have been given a very definite assignment. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the news of the Holy Spirit's surprising presence in our midst, is only good news if it is told and retold until all have heard and all have felt Christ's love.

Is our congregation and its ministry preparing for Christ's return? Are we willing to intrude into the misery and ordinariness of others' lives in order to reveal the surprising gifts God has in store? The church must intrude with its witness -- for discipleship entails particular tasks. Faith aimed at nothing generally scores a bull's eye. It hits nothing and nobody.

Is it right to make the Gospel message "fit" the times? (In the 18th century, great leaders of the church did not spend too much time moaning and groaning about how wicked the age was— instead they preached that God loved the common and the uncommon, the rich and the poor. They told people they were saved by the grace of God almighty. I don't propose we spend too much time with negatives, moaning about what's wrong with our times. We are in charge of the Church—and we each have a job to do. We have the gifts necessary to carry out our jobs faithfully.

God has said, "I'll be right back—you be good and do your work!" God has left the room in charge of the learners.

"It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work (to do)..” (Mark 13:34).

Sources:

The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1995.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.

The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.