
In the Face of the Unknown

Matthew 24: 36-44

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You don't know the answer. I don't know the answer. And God is not telling.

This is not the ordinary unknown. There are lots of times we don't know the answer and there are a variety of ways of coping with that. Routinely when I am leading Bible study, someone will ask a question for which I have no immediate answer. It doesn't bother me to quickly acknowledge my lack of information or insight then toss the question back to the group. The participants usually have wise input, Google can lead us to quick factual answers, and at times one person will offer to do some research and report back to the whole group. Standard practice.

I learned recently that tangents are standard practice as well, particularly in interviews that are broadcast live. Laura Lee, of WUNC radio, described the critical importance of avoiding dead air time in a live radio interview. For that reason, she suggested that if an interviewee is asked a question for which he or she has no coherent answer, the response should be along the lines of "That's a really interesting question, which reminds me of ..." something that has absolutely nothing to do with anything but is a topic I am comfortable addressing. So that is why some interviews seem to zigzag all over the place!

No one can be informed on all topics and questions come that we can't answer. The gospel of Matthew reminds us today of what we don't know, and it is a grand unknown. When? When will the Son of Man come? When will his glory be fully revealed? When will this world be finally, completely redeemed?

Built into these grand questions are the ones we may hold close to our hearts. When will bombs stop killing? When will all children have enough to eat? When will I know if my health, my relationships, my work, my life will improve? When, O Lord?

According to the gospel narrative, at this point in Jesus' life, the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders was escalating. Jesus was sharp, pointed, and persistent in his criticism of hypocrites and blind guides. (Matt 23) Tensions were high. People may have been unnerved as they saw the stable structures of their religious life challenged. In Matthew's day, the readers had likely suffered war and the destruction of the Temple, leaving the people with endless questions about the state of the world.¹ There was literally rubble in their community, and life as they knew it was torn apart.

While people in the days of Jesus and Matthew raised profound questions, they were hardly the first to do so. The Psalmist also pours out questions to God.

¹ *Belief Theological Commentary: Matthew* by Anna Case-Winters, p. 270-272

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)

It is an ancient question. When? When will this chaos end?

Jesus responds to all these questions with a simple “no one knows” and God is not telling. (Matthew 24:36) Because no one knows, the coming of the Son of Man will be a surprise, just as the flood was a surprise in the days of Noah. There were no hurricane warnings or evacuation notices before it started to rain. With the exception of Noah and his family, the flood was a surprise to everyone. Also to illustrate surprise, Jesus spoke of people going about their ordinary business, in the field or in the mill, completely unaware of what would take place. Then one person is taken and the other left. Five times in these few verses we see the non-answer to a profound question: "no one knows, not even the Son" (36); "they knew nothing" (39); "you do not know" (42); if the owner had known" (43); and "at an unexpected hour" (44).

Despite our planning, organizing, and studying we all live with a great deal of uncertainty. Despite our best efforts of control, interruptions often come disrupting our well-laid plans. Some interruptions are a bump in the road; others are life-changing. In the academic world, scholarly papers, which bring wonderful new insight and groundbreaking research, often end with familiar comment that “more research needs to be done”. Education can result in new questions and fresh uncertainty.

So what do we do in the face of the unknown? Jesus encourages us to be ready, watchful. He gives an illustration of a homeowner who is to stay awake, protecting the house from thieves. This is more than remembering to lock the door, turn on a porch light, and set an alarm. This is watching and waiting for the unexpected; listening carefully for any strange noises. Its mindfulness multiplied. It is the suspense of waiting for the other shoe to drop. It is more sleepless nights. This seems to be a recipe for anxiety. We don’t know what’s coming, so watch, wait, worry.

Do you suppose this is the intent of this passage? How many times does scripture say, “Do not be afraid?” Doesn’t Jesus himself say, “do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ...indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

It is possible, perhaps, to respond to the unknown with a carefree attitude. What more do we need to know than the promise that God cares for us? The birds of the air and the lilies of the field do not worry, so why should we? Isn’t possible, even wise or desirable, to step back from all of the anxieties of this world, to stop reading the news, to ignore the troubles we are powerless to impact, and to simply enjoy the birds, the lilies and the other beauties of the world? It is a tempting notion to pull back from all that which is distressing and to focus only that which is pleasant. Such a stance may be particularly attractive as we stand on the cusp of a holiday season which for some feels more like a vortex than a celebration. Maybe we should just withdraw. Tempting as it may seem, it is too much like apathy or resignation. Even those in the monastic traditions do not ignore the needs of the world.

Neither anxiety nor apathy is what appears in Matthew. Earlier in this discourse, Jesus warned about being led astray. He spoke of teachings and rumors that could be alarming, and urges us not to be distracted by them. He even speaks of an increase in chaos, which will cause the love of many to grow cold. He encourages endurance to the end -- the endurance of love. (Matthew 24: 4, 12-13) Regardless of what happens in the world around us, wars, rumors, false prophets, our love is to remain strong. This is one indication of how we are to respond to the unknown.

Today's passage speaks about the unexpectedness of the coming of the Son of Man. Vigilance is encouraged. Then Jesus keeps on talking. This passage is followed by several parables which give some shape to the waiting.² One story tells of slaves put in charge of the household during the master's absence. One slave treats others well; the other does not. (Matthew 24:45-51) Another tells of bridesmaids; some bring a supply of oil for their lamps, others do not. (Matthew 25:1-13) And there is the story of a gathering of people who are separated into groups, the way a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. (Matthew 25:31-46)

In each of these parables, people are going about their ordinary daily business. They are running households, preparing for weddings, living their lives. They are not filled with anxiety nor have they succumbed to apathy. Some are managing a household, valuable important work. Those who do so justly and fairly, even when no one is looking, are praised. Some women in preparing for a wedding remembered to bring enough oil for their lamps. The task at hand was probably routine and because they had been faithful to the task, they were ready when the bridegroom appeared.

And then there were those who talked to strangers, offered hospitality, and cared for those in need and did so in such a way that they truly expected nothing in return. This is the story of the final judgement, in which the Son of Man comes in glory. The nations will be gathered before him, and he placed some on his right and others on his left. As he welcomed some into his kingdom, he praised for having cared for him when he hungry, sick, or imprisoned. The people are honestly befuddled. When did we do any of that? "And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt 25:31-40) Here were people just living their lives, as faithfully as they knew how, imperfect at best, and were genuinely surprised when Jesus said, "Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." (Matthew 25:34)

These are examples of faithfulness lived out in ordinary life. They are daily routines that usually do not make headlines, but do make a difference. They are evident all around us. One man patiently cares for his wife with Alzheimer's, even while he maintains a full time job, all with a degree of patience and love that is admirable. A woman attends to the experiment in the lab, following various leads in her research, showing up day after day. A student re-reads the chapter one more time, even though he is more than ready to be done with the semester.

Occasionally, one person's routine response becomes news. A few months ago, Robert Borba ran an errand to his local Walmart. In the process of that shopping trip, he heard a woman yelling "Stop him! Stop him! He stole my bike!" Borba looked up and saw a man riding away on a bicycle, so he did what he does every day. Because he works at a ranch in Oregon, and had ridden his horse to Walmart, he took off on horseback after the bike thief, lassoed him, and tied him to a tree. He then

² *The Gospel of Matthew*, R.T. France, p. 938

called 911 so the police would come; as you can imagine, the dispatcher was surprised to the point of being incredulous. When interviewed about his actions, Borba simply responded that he wanted to do the right thing and needed no attention for his actions. He did, however, ask for his rope back.³

We don't know what a particular day will bring. A day or a season of our lives may unfold in a predictable and linear way, or it may be filled with the unexpected. As we face the unknown, which we do every day, Jesus calls us not to anxiety or apathy, but to faithfulness, steadfastness, and love.

Not everything is unknown; today's passage points to something we do know. The Son of Man will come. There may be questions about *when* Jesus will come again, but no uncertainty about *if* he will. How and when some final redemption will be revealed is unknown, but we can be sure that the future belongs to God and to God alone. So even though this "little apocalypse" in Matthew may seem unsettling, there is profound promise undergirding it. The promise is that just as God was present at the beginning of time and before creation, so God will be present at the end of time when God's kingdom will be fully revealed. For those who live in the midst of uncertainty, such as those of the psalmist's day, of Jesus' day, those of Matthew's day, those of our day, this is a comfort. It is our hope. God is not done with us yet. God is not done with us yet as individuals, as a church, as a society, as a world. More is yet to come and because it is from God, we know it will be good.

It is the hope we have in God, the promise of the Son of Man, that counters any anxiety we may have and allows even to live joyful lives in the midst of the unknown. The certainty of God's presence now and the advent of redemption dispel our anxiety. There is no need to worry about tomorrow, but we are to strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. (Matthew 6:33-34) Our Lord's teachings that remind us to serve Christ in our daily tasks, and so dedicate ourselves to God's service. We cannot be apathetic, for when we care for others, we are caring for Jesus himself. This is our call to live holy lives.

Presbyterians in their "Brief Statement of Faith" put it this way.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"⁴

Our Lord Jesus will come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ CBS News; Sept. 30, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/hero-oregon-cowboy-lassoes-attempted-bike-thief/>

⁴ A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (USA), 1983.