



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Excuse Me, Is God Coming?”

Matthew 24:36-44

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Someone handed it to my sister and me at a shopping mall. We didn’t show it to our parents but hid it in our pockets and then looked at it when we were home. It was a tract about the second coming. It depicted the world after the rapture—with cartoon illustrations of a lawnmower suddenly without its operator, a baseball field with only half its players, a car that crashes because its driver is suddenly gone. The message was clear: profess your faith in Jesus Christ today. You don’t want to be left behind.

My sister and I carefully read the pamphlet. Then we looked at each other and started to laugh. We knew that this tract was supposed to frighten us but we were pretty sophisticated kids. The pamphlet was badly done, the illustrations amateur, the language exaggerated. We were church kids. We knew the Bible. We knew the story of the prodigal son. We knew that even the sinner is welcomed home. We knew that the pamphlet got the story wrong.

As an adult, I was a little taken aback when I realized that the pamphlet was Biblically accurate. In fact, it is based on this morning’s text.

Still, how can we take today’s reading seriously? “Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” Maybe you’ve seen the bumper sticker: “In case of the Rapture, this car will be driverless.” Or maybe you’ve seen the bumper sticker in response to that first one: “In case of the Rapture, can I have your car?”

It is funny, isn’t it? This whole second coming, Jesus returning thing. It’s funny. And it’s not for us. It’s not about us. I grew up in a Presbyterian church and I don’t remember any mention of the events depicted in this morning’s reading. No classes on the second coming, no preaching about the rapture. That was something that other Christians talked about but not us.

Author and blogger Glennon Doyle tells the story of something that happened when she was working with a group of Sunday School children in her church in Florida. It involves a new kid named Ryan.

Ryan was a head taller than the other children and his eyes were dark and deep, like wells you can look into but never find the bottom of. I was immediately drawn to this little man with the big, deep, sad eyes...

My friends Nancy and Susan started the lesson and we sang and we danced and then we quieted ourselves and went into our still, small place in our hearts where we can listen for God. Then half way through our quiet minute: my big-eyed friend ... tapped me on the shoulder and I leaned down close. He looked around the big sanctuary and he said:

“Excuse me, is God coming?”

Then Ryan looked around again, like he was expecting God to show up... like Ronald shows up occasionally at McDonalds. And I just stared at this little man who had just asked me the question that every single human being who has ever looked around a fancy sanctuary or a busted up family or a hurting friendship or a shocking diagnosis or a messy world is thinking:

“Excuse me, is God coming?”

Doyle continues,

I swallowed hard and I said: “Ryan. That is the best question I have ever heard. Just the best one. Listen, I won’t if you don’t want me to, but I gotta tell you—I think your class needs to hear your ...question. May I share it?”

My big-eyed friend’s eyes got even bigger and he tried to contain a proud little smile and he nodded to me.

I stood up and said, “Miss Nancy, I am so sorry to interrupt you, but this person has just asked the most honest, beautiful, important question I have ever heard anyone ask in my whole entire life. He looked around this room and he said, “[Excuse me.] Is God Coming?”

That’s such a good question. It’s such a good question. It’s the question of this morning’s text. Excuse me, is God coming?

Excuse me, is God coming to your home when your family as you have known it is falling apart? Excuse me, is God coming to the office on the day that you are told the company is phasing out your job? Excuse me, is God coming to sit with you while your nine-month-old is in surgery to receive his new heart? Excuse me, is God coming?

I think of the people who each and every day cross the Mediterranean in search of a better life in Europe. Did you know that since 2014, more than 18,500 people have been recorded dead or missing trying to make that journey?¹ Is God coming to fix that? Is God coming to the people currently undertaking that perilous crossing?

This week I’m thinking of Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart. When they were teenagers in Baltimore, they were arrested and convicted of a murder they did not commit. They spent the last thirty-six years in prison.² Thirty-six years. They were released on Monday. Is God coming to them? And if so, where has God been the last thirty-six years?

“Excuse me, is God coming?”

This has been the question of the people of God from the very beginning. That is the question of this morning’s text. And the answer, according to Matthew chapter twenty-four is “yes.”

I think we should take a little time to wrestle with this passage – not a stereotype of this passage – but the passage itself. Let’s take some time to wrestle with what has been the claim of the church from the very beginning: sooner or later, God in Jesus is going to come back and it’s going to be scary and wonderful and unlike anything the world has ever seen.

¹ <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migrant-deaths-and-disappearances>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/26/us/baltimore-men-freed-after-1983-wrongful-conviction/index.html>

In fact, it was supposed to have happened by now. The earliest believers were certain that Jesus would return in their lifetime. The first crisis for the early church was dealing with the reality that Jesus had not come back in the expected timeframe.

The second crisis for the early church was the growing realization that the world didn't change as much as they had hoped it would. God raised Jesus from the dead, breaking the bonds of death and redeeming all of humanity. Shouldn't that radically change everything? That is a question that we continue to ask today. We live in a post resurrection world yet violence and suffering and brokenness are so prevalent. Why aren't things easier? Why is life so hard? Why do we get so much so wrong? Thirty-six years...

The early Christians asked these questions and came to the conclusion that God's work in Jesus isn't finished. That God is not done with us. God isn't done with the world God created and creates. Someday Jesus is going to come back and finish what he started. He's going to come back and make things right. Wars will cease and justice will rule. Illness and death will no longer exist and all suffering will come to an end. The prophet Isaiah said that on that great day, "the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces." (Isaiah 25:8)

It's a big, beautiful promise. A promise that gives hope to the world. A promise that gives hope to me. It reminds me that the future, your future, my future, is in good hands.

But, what do we do in the meantime? What do we do in the meantime?

According to today's passage, we stay awake. We pay attention. We look for signs of God in the present. We show up. We show up for one another.

Back to Glennon Doyle's story as she tries to answer Ryan's question, "Excuse me, is God coming?"

... it got really quiet and I... tried to respond. I babbled, really. I said, "I don't have an answer, no one does, really. But here's my hunch. I think God's already here. I don't think we wait for God to come as much as we bring God to each other. I think God is inside me and you, Ryan. It's like... you know how cookies have sugar in them and that's what makes them delicious? We have God in us. That's what makes us delicious. And I think God sent US to be here for each other because God's inside of us—so God knows that if we show up—God's here too. God sends us to each other. Because we are all God's family and sometimes family members send each other. You know how sometimes your daddy sends your mommy to pick you up and sometimes your mommy sends your daddy?"

And all the little ones raised their hands and nodded except for Ryan. I stopped and looked right at him. He said, "My daddy doesn't pick me up. My daddy's in heaven."

And Nancy and Susan and I froze because suddenly those deep eyes made perfect sense and all the kids got really quiet in holy reverence for Ryan and his daddy and his questions...

And I let there be silence for a long minute and then when I finally pulled myself together, I ...silently prayed PLEASE GOD HELP ME BE PRESENT FOR THIS AMAZING BOY...and then I started speaking really quietly to him. I said, "Ryan, your daddy is in heaven?" And he nodded. And I said, "I see. Well my guess would be that God and your daddy are together there, and that God sent me and your teachers and these friends to be here with you today. So that we could love you for God. I think that God loves you more than you can even imagine.... I think that God sent you here for me, Ryan. Because ...you have beautiful questions about God and you are honest and kind and I just think that you are my gift from God today, Ryan. Thank you for showing up here. I'm glad I showed up, too. Magic happens

when we go where God sends us, doesn't it? It's like God sends us places to meet God in others. And to be God for others."

This season of Advent isn't just about waiting for God's dramatic return. It isn't just about waiting for the big beautiful promise to be fulfilled. Advent is also about looking for God in the present, in the living of our days, in the world we currently inhabit. In Advent, we pay attention. We go where God sends us. We show up for one another. We show up. And, in doing so, God shows up among us.

This is how Doyle finishes her story.

And then I just went out on a big limb that appeared in front of me.

"Ryan, I don't know how you can know if God is here or not. But here's what happens to me when I notice that God is with me. My heart starts to feel bigger. It feels like it's swelling up. It feels like it's getting so big it might crawl up through my throat. Like right now, next to you—my heart feels huge. Like somebody pumped it full of air. I think this heart swelling is sometimes how God reminds me that God is with me."

And ... Ryan's face—the face that had been so serious and so sad—broke into a smile that made it abundantly clear that God used the *heart swelling trick* on him, too. But he just didn't know it was God doing it. And then he said quietly, "I know what you mean."³

We know that God shows up when our hearts swell. I want to live a life where my heart swells more often.

That got me thinking about what makes my heart swell this time of year. Listening to music so often makes my heart swell. I think of the worship services we have every December 24, looking out at faces lit by candlelight. That makes my heart swell. Every time.

Heart swelling doesn't just happen when things are beautiful and life is good. Heart swelling can happen at moments when life is hard and painful and our hearts are broken and the one we love is gone and we are wracked with loneliness and our hearts swell from all of that because God is with us in it.

I think of Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart experiencing their first Thanksgiving with family and friends in thirty-six years. Did their hearts swell in grief, in anger, in gratitude, in joy? Did they ask,

"Excuse me, is God coming?"

I hope that they can answer "yes" to that question, if not this day then someday. The answer to that question is "yes." God came to us in the form of Jesus many years ago. God comes to us now in the midst of the pain and joy of our life together, making our hearts swell. And, God makes a big beautiful promise to come again and make things right. All of that is contained in the season of Advent.

These Advent days, we ask the question,

"Excuse me, is God coming?"

and, the answer is "yes."

³ <https://momastery.com/blog/2015/04/01/most-important-question/>