

“God’s Divine Thief”
Luke 12:35-40
9th Sunday after Pentecost

August 7, 2022
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Did any of you see the movie “Ford v Ferrari,” came out a few years ago?

In the movie, the actor Christian Bale plays the race-car driver Ken Miles. Ken Miles is an astonishing driver, and in 1966, he has a chance to become the first driver ever to win the triple crown of Daytona, Sebring, and Le Mans in a single year.

Le Mans is the third of those three races.

Miles is driving for Ford, and it’s Ford’s big chance to finally defeat Ferrari at a race that Ferrari has dominated for years.

As the race is drawing to a close, it’s clear that Ken Miles is going to win. It’s not even close. In fact, the 2nd and 3rd place cars are also Ford vehicles, so it’s just going to be a glorious day for Ford.

But the Ford Company executives want to do even more.

They decide that it would be an excellent PR stunt to have all three of their cars cross the finish line at the same time, in a dead heat: get a photo of that, and you have a picture of Ford domination!

So they instruct Ken Miles—
who is demolishing everybody—
to be a team player, to slow down,
and let his fellow Ford drivers finish with him.

Ken Miles reluctantly does so.
And the three cars finish in that dead heat.

This isn't made-up for Hollywood—something very similar actually happened in real life.

Ford got its famous photo op at Le Mans.

But unbeknownst to Ken Miles, there's a catch.

Even though his car is the first to finish by a nose, there's a rule that says that if cars finish the race in a dead heat, the car that drove the furthest distance is the winner, regardless of who actually crossed the finish line first.

And because the Ford cars that were trailing Ken Miles' car actually started behind him and covered maybe 25 more feet than Miles, Ken Miles is NOT declared the winner.

In other words, by doing what Ford told him to do, he's robbed of his victory, and he does not go down in racing history with that triple crown.

In the movie, Christian Bale portrays Ken Miles' reaction to this as one of disappointment, but also like, what else would you expect from the executives at Ford?

In a documentary about these real-life events, however, the real Ken Miles is reported to have been more emotional—devastated—angry that he has been robbed of his rightful victory!¹

Do you know what it's like to be robbed of something?
Robbed of a valued possession?
Or robbed of your time?

¹ As told in "8 Meters: Triumph, Tragedy and a Photo Finish at Le Mans."

Or your health, it was fine, and then it was just...stolen from you?

It can be a painful experience, right?

An UNWELCOME experience, to be sure.

All of which makes the image that Jesus give us today...very strange:

“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Did you catch it?

Jesus says that God will enter our lives...*like a thief!*

Think for a moment about all the images of God that the Bible gives us:

- God is a loving parent (parable of the prodigal son).
- The Lord is my shepherd (Psalm 23).
- “...we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.” (Isaiah 64)
- God is “my fortress...my shield...my rock” (Psalm 18)
- God is “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”
(Revelation 21)

Comforting images.

Strong images.

Hopeful images.

So why would Jesus, in our passage for today, describe God like a thief?

I don't know, but maybe one answer is this.
Think about what a thief does.
A thief doesn't just steal.
A thief is sneaky.

A thief knows how to slip behind security walls without getting caught, knows how to get through our best defenses when we're looking the other way...

One night in 1969, there was a debate at Yale Divinity School.

On one side was the great preacher William Sloane Coffin, the heroic social activist.

On the other side was a lesser-known professor named Paul Holmer.

The subject of the debate was the role of the pastor in the church.
What should the pastor's role be?

Coffin began the debate with what one former student described as an exciting exposition [about the possibility] of social change.

Speaking to this next generation of ministers, Coffin said:

“Because you visit and work with people in a variety of settings, you can organize them to work for justice. You will have important people in your churches—bankers, lawyers. You can do much good getting people motivated to get together and work great change in your community.”

Paul Holmer replied to Coffin like this:

“I disagree with about everything that Bill has said. Your job can’t be to organize people, to bring them together. People hide in groups. It’s one of their best defenses against God. Your job as a pastor is to break up the groups, strip them naked, render them exposed and vulnerable. That way God can get to them...”²

When was the last time God...*really got to you?*

When was the last time God...snuck up on you, and CHANGED you—changed the way you live, changed the way you love?

Let me get at it like this.

Our first scripture passage today may have struck you like an odd choice.

Do you still remember our first scripture for today?

Who was it about?

Noah...that’s right.

God commanding Noah to build an ark.

God telling Noah—get ready!

And so there’s an echo of what Jesus says to us:

“You also must be ready...”

But what does getting ready look like?

Not for Noah...but for us?

I think it means a willingness to CHANGE.

² William H. Willimon, “Teaching Moments: Hard Truths,” in *The Christian Century*, February 22, 2005.

To re-examine who we are and how we love, and then...to change how we love, to change the way we see the world, so that our beliefs and behavior align with the mind and imagination of God.

If you keep reading the story of Noah, CHANGE is the message. After the flood, Noah finds dry land...and then there's a rainbow, right?

The rainbow is a sign of the covenant, the promise that God makes with Noah.

Do you remember that promise?
God says that God will never do anything like that again.

The story of Noah isn't about the animals on the ark.
And it's not so much about Noah.
It's about God.

In the story of Noah, God changes God's mind.
God changes the way that God loves.
And if God changes, so can we.

Of course, the truth is that most of us, on any given day, are basically ok with how we see the world, and who we decide to love. We may need small adjustments along the way, but which one of us really is looking for radical change?

Maybe that's why Jesus says that God will come to us like a thief.
Because Jesus knows how RESISTENT we are to change.

A number of years ago, someone told me about how a bunch of people had left his church because the pastor kept challenging the congregation from the pulpit. But that's why he likes his pastor, he told me, that's why he stays...because his pastor challenges him from the pulpit.

Now that's a nice sentiment...but frankly, it's hogwash.
The truth is that NONE OF US like to be challenged in church.

Or we like our SMALL challenges
when it requires a minimal amount of pain,
a minimal amount of change.

But I don't know a soul who REALLY enjoys getting their cage rattled in church.

Who finds it fun to have an experience of God that shakes us up?

In the verses that come before our Gospel text, in chapter 12 of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is talking about money—he tells the parable of the rich fool, he says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...”

So I'd like to try a little experiment with you this morning.

In your pews right now, I'd like you to get in groups of four or five, and I'd like you to share within that group:

How much money you made this year.
And how much money you spent on vacations this year.
And how much money you gave to church and other charities this year.

Count of three, two, one...go!

What—no one wants to do this?
I don't want to do it.

You see, when it comes to money—there are walls, and things that are my business but no one else's business....so I put up my defenses. Why should anyone imply that I need to change when it comes to how I spend and give my money away?

That's what goes through my mind.

But of course, how we spend our money,
 how we give our money away...
 Jesus was talking about those kind of changes—
 ALL...THE...TIME!

Do you see what we're talking about?
 When was the last time God...**really got to you?**
 When was the last time God...**rattled your cage,**
and...changed you?

Years ago, the Presbyterian pastor Rodger Nishioka was traveling with the moderator of our denomination at that time, Marj Carpenter.

They were visiting the Presbyterian Church in East Africa. They were staying in a hotel in northern Uganda, and the hope, the goal, was to travel to South Sudan.

Why South Sudan?

Because for over 100 years, the Presbyterian Church has had a presence in that part of the world. And Marj Carpenter wanted Dr. Nishioka to meet some of the pastors there, see what ministry was like for them there.

The problem was getting there.
 There was fighting going on.

Getting into and out of South Sudan safely—it was a dicey proposition.

Finally, the decision was made that it was too dangerous, and Dr. Nishioka would not be making that leg of the trip.

So...he went to bed in his hotel room in Uganda.

But at 3am he received a phone call from mission personnel.

And they told him that they thought it would be safe to go that particular day...could he get ready right away?

By 4am, he was in a Range Rover.

It was a three-hour trip to the border.

It was another five hours into South Sudan to the refugee camp that was their destination.

By this time, they had been traveling for 8 hours, and it was the middle of the day, and as Dr. Nishioka describes it...it was SO HOT.

The Ranger Rovers did not have air-conditioning—a poor decision when it came to our denomination's mission spending, in his opinion!

They stopped at the outer area of the refugee camp, and the Sudanese pastors who were there—they knew they had guests from America coming, so there was a canopy with shade. And Dr. Nishioka got to sit under this canopy, surrounded by a couple thousand people, most of whom were not sitting under the canopy.

And then the pastors started to preach.

Because of the special guests from the United States, Dr. Nishioka said that each pastor had clearly prepared their best and their LONGEST sermon for the occasion.

One by one, these pastors got up and preached...and preached...and preached...and it was SO HOT, he said. He was sweating profusely in the heat, and there were flies swarming around him—why flies?

Because they were looking for moisture.

And Dr. Nishioka says that he was the EPITOMY of moisture at that moment.

After a couple hours of this, Marj Carpenter turned to Dr. Nishioka and asked, “Rodger, what’s wrong with this picture?”

And he replied: “I am WAY TOO HOT!!”

And she said, “No...what’s wrong with this picture?”

And he said: “These pastors are preaching WAY TOO LONG!!”

And she said: “No...what’s wrong with this picture?”

And he said, “I don’t know, Marj, what’s wrong?”

And she said, “Look at the babies.”

What about the babies?

Lots of moms were there in that crowd, holding their babies.

And she said, “Listen—what’s going on?”

And Rodger said he didn’t know.

And she said, “Rodger, they’re not making any noise. They’re too weak. That’s what’s wrong.”

He was so hot, so focused on his own discomfort, he had not noticed the silence of the babies.

Finally, they finished the worship service.

They drove to the inner part of the camp, where they—these well-fed and, by any comparative measure, wealthy Americans...they were offered food.

So Dr. Nishioka sat down to eat.

In front of Dr. Nishioka was water to drink, and a bowl of porridge.

The Sudanese pastors were smiling, beaming, even though they had no food in front of them.

Dr. Nishioka was going to offer some of his porridge to one of those pastors...but Marj Carpenter stopped him.

“Eat your food,” she said.

“That’s 3-4 days rations for these pastors. They’re making a sacrifice to offer this to you. You will eat that food.”

And he did.

As they were leaving, people were lining up outside the Range Rovers, and they were waving white handkerchiefs, which were symbols of glory and joy in God.

They were smiling, beaming at their departing guests.

Dr. Nishioka was embarrassed, having been given so much by people who had so little, he didn’t really want to look at them.

But Marj Carpenter told him:

You need to smile and wave back at them.

You need to see them...and they need to see you seeing them.

Dr. Nishioka says that it was an experience he will never forget.

That those images and that day will forever be seared on his soul.³

I think we could say...God got to him that day!

“You also must be ready,” says Jesus, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Are you getting ready?

Not for the rapture...not just for school to start soon...are you and I getting ready for God?

Here’s something we can all do to get ready: consider ONE THING about your life that you know needs to change, even though you are resistant to that change, and put defenses up all the time.

Consider that today.

And then—HEAR the good news of the gospel:

God...is SNEAKY.

And the joint that God is casing,

the home and heart that God is scouting out—

they belong to you.

Amen.

³ From the Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka’s sermon, “Jesus Really Wants Us to See,” preached at Village Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, KS, February 27, 2022.