

“Left Behind”

Matthew 24:36-44

1st Sunday of Advent

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As we begin this morning’s sermon, I’ve got two words that I’d like you to pay attention to:

Left behind...

Have you ever considered the degree to which those two words govern so much of what we think and see and do?

You can find those two words in the world of politics, right?

One of the governing narratives of the past 15 years in the American political landscape is that a large part of our society has felt economically pushed out, their dignity ignored, impossible to purchase a home and pursue the American Dream...in other words, a portion of our country feels **left behind**.

But it’s not just in politics.
Sometimes it’s personal.

At the first church that I served as an associate pastor, I would periodically take our youth group to watch a Rangers baseball game.

And I recall one night, when we got back from the game, everyone getting out of their cars, and then one of the youth said, “Wait a minute...where’s Shelby?”

I said, “What do you mean, ‘Where’s Shelby?’”

“I thought she was with you.”

“No, I thought she was with you.”

“You mean we left one of our youth at the stadium??!!”

This was in the days before smartphones, there was no way to text Shelby or call Shelby...I started to get back in my car, and was about to race back to the stadium when one of the trunks of the other cars popped open...and out came Shelby!

That car had made it back to the church 2 minutes before I did, and those teenagers thought it would be a very funny joke to play on their new pastor...to pretend that Shelby had been what?

Left behind.

Heck, we know the power of those two words every Sunday.
What's the charge I say each week?

Go out into God's world in peace, have courage, hold onto what is good.

Hold onto what is good.

What does that mean?

It means whatever is good in your life,

whatever is a gift of God in your life,

don't let other parts of your life distract you...

don't leave what is good behind.

All of which makes our text from Matthew this morning so very puzzling. Why would Jesus, of all people, say that when he comes again, someone gets left behind?

“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.”

You know, Jesus talks about his return, his second coming, in ALL FOUR GOSPELS. But Matthew's is the only Gospel where we find that image.

The image of children of God being left behind.
And there's a lot of bad theology that's been born from that image, right?

As the biblical scholar Matthew Skinner writes:
"More than a few preachers and teachers use [these verses] to [say] that Jesus will someday whisk away all the true believers from the face of the earth, so everyone else will be left behind..."

As Skinner puts it, it turns the Second Coming of Jesus into "a prediction of divine terror...a view that seems eager to ascribe unusual cruelty to God."¹

In theological circles, it has to do with something called Premillennial Dispensationalism (if you get bored this Advent, you can look that one up!)

It's definitely at odds with our Reformed theology.
Presbyterians do not believe in "the rapture."

But what do we believe, when it comes to a text like the one that's before us today?

Let's take a step back.
What day is today?
The first Sunday of Advent.

¹ Matthew L. Skinner, "Voices of Advent: The Bible's Insights for a Season of Hope," Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2025.

The word Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “arrival” or “coming.” And there are THREE WAYS that we’re taught to think about the arrival of Jesus during this season:

- 1) His arrival in the past. In other words, we’re preparing for Christmas, to remember the birth of our Lord long ago.
- 2) His arrival in the future. The Second Coming of Christ. The belief that Jesus will come again is indeed a part of our Reformed tradition. All four Gospels talk about this—as Jesus puts it in John’s Gospel: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”
- 3) But the third way that we’re invited, during Advent, to consider Christ’s arrival is in the present. It’s the hope that Jesus just might show up...not only at some future day, but in your life and my life TODAY.²

And this is where I think other parts of Matthew’s Gospel speak to THIS perplexing part of Matthew’s Gospel. Because what happens when Jesus shows up in someone’s life?

He asks them *to leave something behind*.

Do you remember the call of the disciples?
Matthew, chapter 4:

“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers...he said to them, “Follow me...”

And what did Peter and Andrew do?

² Ibid.

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

“As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James...and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee...and he called them.

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

What if, what if—the hope that we talk about on the first Sunday of Advent comes not from addition, but from subtraction? From the grace of God helping us...to leave something behind?

This is where our first text for today comes into play.
The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids.

It's an Advent parable.
You know the parable.
The wise are the ones who get into the wedding banquet.
The foolish are left out of the wedding banquet.

It's another story about the Second Coming of Jesus, and it sure sounds in this story like someone gets left behind...
but I'm not so sure.

I think we make assumptions right from the beginning...that each of the bridesmaids stands for a different person.

Five foolish. Five wise.
Is that the right assumption?

After all, show of hands...how many of you in this room are **WISE...all the time?** And how many of you are foolish...**ALL THE TIME?**

And how many of you, by God's grace, have made some wise decisions with your life, and along the way, you've also made foolish decisions in your life?

You see, it strikes me that if we're talking about the foolish and the wise, we're not talking about two different groups of people.

We're talking about two tendencies in ALL PEOPLE.

So what if the message from Matthew at the start of Advent is that whatever is foolish in our lives, whatever is getting in the way of our relationship with God in our lives...whatever it is, Jesus will help us leave that part behind?

I recall a story Tex Sample once told.

The story wasn't about Tex Sample, it was about a friend of his...his friend's name is Jimmy Hope Smith.

Now the first thing you need to know about Jimmy Hope Smith is that he had a thick accent. He grew up in Alabama, and he retained his Alabama accent for his entire life. And because I grew up in the Midwest, and have this very flat, nasal accent...I'm not about to try to imitate Jimmy Hope's accent...but I think you can get it your mind.

Thick accent, speaks very, very slowly.

That's the first thing you need to know about Jimmy Hope.

The second thing you need to know about Jimmy Hope is that he was smart.

Like really, REALLY smart.

One of the things Jimmy Hope Smith was really smart about was aesthetics.

He studied aesthetics a whole lot.
He knew Kant. He knew Heidegger.
He knew them all...and what he enjoyed doing was going to a party and talking about art.

And because of his deliberate speech and thick accent, sometimes people at that party thought Jimmy Hope Smith wasn't that smart. They had a preconceived idea of what smart was supposed to sound like.

And some of those people at the parties would try to make Jimmy Hope look bad. Trying to make Jimmy Hope Smith look bad about art, Tex Sample said, was like trying to kiss a rattlesnake.

But I don't want you to think of snakes when you think of Jimmy Hope Smith.

I want you to think about the time when Jimmy Hope and Tex Sample were at a church conference. And the conference got done about nine, ten o'clock at night, and they headed back to the motel, along with five or six other people.

And they found themselves in a motel room—
one of those tiny, constricted motel rooms—
just shootin' the breeze,
with a stranger sitting in between Tex and Jimmy Hope.

Before too long, they realized that the man sitting in between them was no longer shootin' the breeze. He was talking about something very, very close.

They realized it was something they were not prepared to know.

The man began to talk about his wife's suicide.

How one day when he was away, she had laid down under their bed, face up, and took the drugs that took her life.

He looked all over the house before he found her.

Then he went into one of the most AGONIZING conversations anyone had ever heard. About how he felt responsible for his wife's death...even though, by any reasonable estimate, she had suffered from the kind of chronic depression that all his care and compassion could NEVER have rescued her from...

It was clear to everyone—what happened was not his fault.
But this man's GUILT...was consuming him.

Jimmy Hope was sitting to this man's right.

"I want to tell you somethin'," Jimmy Hope said.

"I'm ordained. And by the power of Christ, I have the authority to forgive sins—real sins, and ***imagined sins...***"

Then Jimmy Hope drew the sign of the Cross on that man's chest.

"I want you to know that from this day forward, you are HEALED.

You are healed of everything you ever did to your wife.

And you are free...

free of everything you ever ***imagined***

you did to your wife.

You are a free man."

Sample says that he heard from that stranger three years later.

The man's life had utterly turned around.³

How did it turn around?

By the love and grace of Jesus,
 what was CONSUMING HIM...
 got left behind.

Have you ever thought of those two words, **left behind**—
 not as bad words, not as perplexing words,
 but as some of the most hopeful words in all of scripture?

Friends, the good news today is that it's Advent.
 Which means Jesus is coming.
 It's time to get ready for his arrival.
 What are you going to leave behind?

Is it the anger that's consuming you?
 Or the fear that's overwhelming you?
 Or your resentment that a loved one has failed you?

I don't know.
 I do know this.

If you and I, by God's grace, can lay it down,
 let it go,
 leave it behind...

Then I imagine that there's going to be some extra space in your heart this Christmas.

Kind of like an empty room in your heart.

³ Tex Sample told this story at the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville, Tennessee, April, 1999.

Imagine that.

A place in your heart that's no longer filled with all that clutter and baggage.

Maybe, when Jesus shows up this Christmas Eve,
looking for a place to stay—
you can offer him your heart,
with its newly uncluttered room...

Amen.