

Pollocksville 11/28/2021 “Mind the Gap!”

Matthew 24: 36-44 *Message Translation* "But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows.

37-39 "The Arrival of the Son of Man will take place in times like Noah's. Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing—until the flood hit and swept everything away.

39-44 "The Son of Man's Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind. So stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up."

When it comes to dealing with Scripture, Jesus does not appear as a rigid, literalist. He often spoke in parables.// In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, he repeatedly makes reference to a command from the Hebrew Bible only to expand and deepen its significance: *"You have heard that it was said. . . . but I say to you. . . ."*

Something similar happens in today's Gospel. // Jesus recounts the story of Noah and the building of the ark. Yet, he tells it differently than what we find in Genesis. **There** the world is corrupt and filled with violence in God's sight. That is why God sends the flood.

But as Jesus tells it, people in the days of Noah were *"carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark."*: ordinary and acceptable human activities. The problem lies not in these activities, but in how the people of Noah's time *"knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. . . ."* They were sufficiently distracted by the usual business of life that they ended up losing their lives. ////

"Mind the Gap" the announcer says.//

Jesus cites the Noah story to illuminate how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man at the end of history. The separation of those taken and those left does not depend on people's behavior, whether good or bad, but God's choices not our good deeds. And it depends on their awareness, whether they are capable of recognizing Christ when he comes. What's called for is not perfect behavior, but alertness. What's required is not abstaining from ordinary life, but maintaining in the midst of the ordinary, a sense of the extraordinary, a recognition of the holy so that we will be ready when God chooses.//

Two weeks ago we returned from spending time in London and Germany with our daughters and their families.// One of the great things about London is the subway or tube system, a network of underground public trains that serve the city of London and a massive area round it.

One reaches a number of tube stations by taking a long set of steps or an escalator deep down beneath the surface of the city. Some of these escalators, I am told, are among the tallest in the world.

Once you reach the appropriate track, the train you seek will come within only a few minutes, unless it is there already. //

The train platform is a remarkable place. Why? Because it is governed by a single purpose: the coming and going of trains. The people gathered there, whether many or few, have this common point of reference, and all of them are aware of it. There on the platform the coming and going of the trains is inescapable. The train has either left; or the train has stopped, however momentarily; or the train is expected to arrive. Signs above each track indicate how many minutes until the next train arrives. // Wouldn't it be nice to have a sign above every church.. "so many minutes/hours/years until the coming of Christ.!" //

People on the Tube platform have an awareness which sets them utterly apart from Noah's distracted neighbors. Those neighbors were preoccupied by the ordinary business of life, enough to miss the train, or in their case, the ark.// People on the tube platform are governed by the single focus of trains gone, trains that have stopped, and trains still to come. //

The Christian is someone who recognizes a single focus like that. Not on trains, but on The Christ who has come, is here, and is yet to come.

As Christians, we must avoid the distraction that spelled disaster for Noah's neighbors. We need the sense of awareness, a shared awareness that characterizes the people on the “tube” platform as they focus on the incoming train.

This Advent season which starts today is an invitation to such “tube” moments, not only during the weeks up to Christmas, but through the entire year. Thus Advent season is a model for living the Christian life, living in the awareness, the collective awareness, that Christ keeps interrupting the ordinary cycle of life, and that these interruptions give our life its significance, its power, its meaning.

Some “tube” moments, as I call them, take us utterly by surprise. Others occur when we open ourselves through the practice of prayer, a retreat from distraction that leaves us susceptible to God.

We can have our “tube” moments when we recognize that for Christians that the common point of reference, the determining focus, is the Holy One, Jesus, who will come, has come, and is present now among us in the form of the Holy Spirit.

As the London commuter descends down long escalators to the station far below the surface of the city, so sometimes in prayer and meditation we descend to a secret place in our heart where Christ encounters us, the Christ who was, who is, and who is to come.

But “tube” moments happen elsewhere too. In every tube station is some sort of refreshment stand, a place to grab a quick cup of coffee, or a roll.... Today our refreshment stand is this table... spread with the elements of renewal, bread and the juice of the grape. // Let today be a refreshment moment for you as the train of life carries you to the table of grace. //

Today's Gospel belongs to a section of Matthew that ends with a scene of the final judgment. There King Jesus makes it clear that we meet him in other people, in the sick, the Hispanic, the poor, the prisoner. Christ acknowledges our service to His kingdom through what we do, or fail to do, for them, the least of these.

So there too, we experience a “tube” moment, when what prevails is not the distractions that annoy us, but the Christ who was and who will be, meeting us now in some other person whose hands are open, seeking help.

The neighbors of Noah stand as a warning during this Advent season and always as is displayed in London and voiced over the PA system in the train: **“Mind the Gap!”** Which means, don’t step between the train and the platform. Don’t fall into the abyss! Don’t fall into a life of sin.

We are all gathered on the same platform to which the Holy One comes like a glorious train, its headlight piercing the darkness.

We meet this Holy One when we move out of ourselves in prayer to God, and when we move out of ourselves in service to others.

Take time, during the month ahead to recognize **that** sacred reality which is far grander than all our absorbing preoccupations. // Dare to wait, to wait for the train of faith which reliably and unexpectedly thunders through our existence, which brought us here for free, and will take us on home to glory.

And make room **on your** Christmas list for people whose names you do not know, but **in whom** you can meet Christ alive. Expand your generosity to include those who have nothing to give you except a blessing. // Offer gifts this season to the Christ who awaits your kindness in the person of the poor and the hungry and the prisoner, the disadvantaged family, the migrant, the refugee.

For **whether** you **see** them or **not**, they stand beside you. There is only one platform, and there is only one train, that has come, and will come, and comes at this moment.

We leave the one platform and we crowd aboard the one train, and we ride together, the poor and the hungry and the prisoner, the disadvantaged families, the migrants, the refugee, all of us together, thundering through the darkness of this world, awaiting the bright light of eternal day. Amen