

Moments Least Expected
Based on Matthew 24:36-44
December 2, 2007
Aspen Community United Methodist Church

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Some things happen when we least expect them.

I think about how easy it is to be distracted and miss things – important things.

I think this reading has a lot to do with being present to what is going on.

The work of God happens when it happens –
not when I may be ready and willing to do something or be present for something.

I thought of a short story by Leo Tolstoy.

Tolstoy was a Russian writer and philosopher, and a convert to Christianity.

His works help us think in a more timeless way.

His stories give us access to a kind of wisdom that helps us remember our relationships
and responsibilities to one another.

For some reason this story came to mind because of how present the characters are
to what is happening in the moment.

Let's listen to his story, and see if it helps us relate to our scripture today.

There was once a king who felt the pressures and demands of his office.¹

He said to his wife, "If only I could determine which people
and which affairs of the kingdom were the most important,
I could use my time better and be a more effective king."

"There are many wise people in the kingdom," the queen said. "Consult with them." And he did.

One by one, politicians, scholars, and advisers were invited to the palace
to give advice to the king. Some suggested that the priests were most important. Others insisted that he
focus his attention on the military, while still others urged him to give preference to the educators.

Each argued hard and reasoned well, but the king remained confused.

Once again he sought advice from the queen.

"No two groups agree," the king told her. "How do I decide to whom I will listen?"

"Find a neutral party." She suggested. Find someone who is not beholden
to the military, the scholars, or the church.

Perhaps it is time to visit the wise hermit."

The king agreed. Accompanied by his bodyguards, he set off
to find the wise hermit who lived deep in the woods.

The hermit, it was rumored, would only receive the poor.
Therefore the king put on humble clothing and before reaching the hermit's hut,
got off his horse, left his bodyguards behind, and continued on foot alone.

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When he reached the hut, the king saw the hermit digging a garden.
The hermit paused long enough to greet the stranger and went back to digging.

The hermit was thin and looked weak, and he breathed with difficulty
as he plunged his spade into the earth.

The king approached the hermit and said,

"I have come to ask for answers to two questions:

Which people are essential?

Or to put it another way, with whom should I spend my time?

My second question is, what business is the most important, and should be taken care of first?"

The hermit listened to the king intently -
and, without answering, started digging again.

"You are tired," the king said. "Give me the spade. I'll work for you."

"Thank you," said the hermit, handing over the tool.

After digging for nearly two hours, the king stopped and repeated his questions.

The hermit did not answer, but stood up and reached for the spade saying,

"You rest now; let me dig."

The king refused and continued to work. Two hours passed, and the sun began to set behind the trees
when the king thrust the spade in the earth and said,

"I came to you for an answer to my questions.

If you can't or won't answer, say so, and I'll go home."

"Look," the hermit said. "Someone is running toward us. Let's see who it is."

A bearded man was running out of the woods, clutching his hands to his stomach.

Blood flowed between his fingers. He ran straight toward the king.

Before reaching him the man stumbled and fell to the ground.

Quickly the king and the hermit unfastened the man's clothing
and discovered a large wound in his stomach.

The king washed it as well as he could and bandaged it with his own handkerchief
and one of the hermit's clean rags.

When the blood kept flowing, the king removed the blood-soaked bandage,
and then washed and bound the wound again several times.

Finally the bleeding stopped. The wounded man awoke and asked for water.

The king brought fresh water and helped the man to drink it.

Meanwhile, the sun had set and the air turned cool.

The hermit and the king carried the wounded man into the hut and laid him on the bed.

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Then the king, exhausted from the unusual effort of the day, fell asleep.
When he awoke in the morning, the king looked up to see the bearded man lying on the bed,
looking intently at him. It took a few moments for the king to remember where he was
and the identity of the man in the bed.

"Forgive me," the bearded man said in a weak voice.

"I don't know you and have no reason to forgive you," said the king.

"I know you," the man confessed. "I swore to take vengeance on you for having executed my brother.

I followed you to the home of the hermit and hid along the path,
planning to kill you when you returned home.

When several hours passed and you did not appear, I came out of my ambush to find you.

I stumbled on your bodyguards, who recognized and wounded me.

I escaped from them, but I would have bled to death if you had not bandaged my wound.

I wanted to kill you, but you saved my life.

Now, if I live and if you wish, I will be your most faithful servant and order my family to do likewise.

Please forgive me."

And so, the king made peace with his enemy, forgiving him
and promising to send his personal physician to stay with him until he gained his health.

Leaving the wounded man, the king left the hut and looked for the hermit.

He found him kneeling in the garden they had dug that day before.

"For the last time, my friend, I ask you to answer my questions."

"But they have already been answered," the hermit replied.

"I don't understand," the king responded.

If you had not been moved with compassion for my weakness yesterday and stayed to dig,
you would have returned home.

The man would have attacked you.

I was the most important person, and the most important task was to do good for me.

Later, when the man appeared, it was the best time for you to take care of him,
for if he had died - peace would never have been made between the two of you.

Therefore, he was the most important man,
and what you did for him was the most important task.

There is only one important time:

Now. And the most important person is the person we see now.

God gives us one opportunity at a time.

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The person I meet now and the task that lies immediately before me
are always more important than anyone or anything in the future.

The future may never happen. The present is a reality."

Advent is a time to heighten our awareness of the moments in our lives that
may have more meaning than we might notice.

Our reading today seems more about warning us what will happen if we are not ready.

By being ready I mean being more present, or fully present.

But, it is good to remember that at the time it was written
people were more concerned about the return of Christ in the end times
than they were the day-to-day of life as we know it now.

Even so, it does give us something to think about in being aware of
the possibility of what is in front of us, and who is in front of us.

What and who may be just what is in order, and just the gift God has for us.

This is a good message for me, and I hope it is for you.

So many things compete for our attention,
and we can rush from one to the other with little reflection.

In a season of bus-i-ness, let's listen for divine messages in unexpected moments.

It may be a new way to consider a problem -
or a chance to reconcile a relationship -
or a new way to be ourselves.

The possibilities are there –
if we are ready to be more present, aware, awake to a kind of divine intrusion -
to moments least expected.

Or we will miss them.

In the watching for them – in the witnessing of them – in the observing of them
we will made the richer for being there.

May the season be upon us.

¹ Adapted from William R. White in *Stories for the Gathering: A Treasury for Christian Storytellers*. P. 22