

The Burglar Comes

A sermon on Matthew 24: 36-44 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 November 2025

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Message

The coming Christ will do whatever he can to get through our defences.

Sermon

Most of us have had the experience at some stage of having our houses burgled. It is an awful feeling. I probably haven't experienced it as much as most people, because I choose to live with dogs. I don't live with dogs because they deter burglars, but it is a nice side benefit.

There was a time some years back when I was living in the church manse when we came home and there had been some kind of disturbance. There was a bath towel that wasn't ours in the back yard and the wheelie bin was at the back gate instead of next to the door. At first we couldn't work out what it meant, but then we discovered that several neighbouring houses had been burgled that week, and mostly the burglar had broken a window by punching it with a fist wrapped in a towel. So we figured that the burglar had got to our back door, whereupon the dog had burst out through the dog door, and the burglar had dropped the towel and used the wheelie bin to fend off the dog while backing out the gate.

Eliz and Ian had a somewhat similar experience when a police officer contacted them and said "Keep the dog." "What do you mean, keep the dog?" they asked. "Well," said the officer, "all your neighbours have been burgled this week, but your dog wouldn't let us in either, so you can thank the dog that you haven't been burgled."

But, of course, sometimes I go out with my dogs and, sure enough, the only time we have been burgled in the last few decades was when we went away for a long weekend and took the dogs with us. We got off lightly. We didn't cop any of the turn-the-whole-house-upside-down thing that burglars sometimes do. It seemed that they were only after jewellery and so that's all they took. But it is still an awful feeling.

People often describe it as a feeling of being violated. Some stranger with malicious intent has been in your home and fingering your belongings. And it often leaves you feeling unsafe. How do you know they are not planning to come back? Some burglars who specialise in TV, computer, and stereo equipment deliberately plan to wait long enough for you to have processed your insurance claim and replaced everything, and then they come back and steal your new stuff. And the police will tell you that there is no security system that cannot be beaten, and that there are some burglars who see alarms and security systems as a challenge that they relish taking on and beating. No wonder a burglary leaves us feeling jumpy and frightened.

So what is Jesus on about when he compares God to a burglar? Maybe the image is not such a surprise for us this time round, because [Karen preached a wonderful sermon on it](#) when Jesus said something very similar in one of our readings back in August. What she said was excellent, and deserves to be reinforced, so I want to explore it again in this slightly different context. What are we doing using this image to open the season of Advent with its focus on preparing for the coming Messiah. In what ways are our preparations for the coming of the Messiah comparable to the preparations we make to try to prevent our houses being burgled?

As Karen said, it goes without saying that this is not one of the more attractive images of the Messiah in our Bible. And it has always caused more than a little discomfort. A number of the preserved sermons from some of the great preachers and theologians of the early centuries have interpreted the burglar image as being the devil, and we have to make careful preparations to defend ourselves against the crafty attacks of the devil. Now that's clearly true, in itself, but if we're honest about it, it is not what Jesus seems to be saying here.

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Clearly the one being compared to the thief is the coming Lord, the Messiah. And the Apostle Paul uses the same image in his first letter to the Thessalonians when he says, “you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

There are at least two different ways of responding to this image, both of which are good and true and probably intended by Jesus.

The first is the more threatening or scary image. It is a warning. When we talk about preparing for the inevitable – not if but when – coming of the burglar, we are clearly talking about preparing for something bad, for something we want to avoid the negative consequences of. And at one level, what Jesus is saying is the same: for those who are unprepared, the coming of the Messiah will blow their world apart. There will be judgement and radical change, and if you have invested everything in the status quo, then you will lose everything.

When the Messiah comes to put everything right, if you are committed to the way things were, and doing your best to profit from them, then you will be one of the obstacles he has to deal with rather than one of the allies who welcome the day of his coming.

It's quite clear that this kind of warning is an important part of what Jesus is saying with this burglar image. You can tell from the way he uses the image of Noah's Ark at the same time. As we heard read, Jesus said, “As the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Now Jesus is not condemning eating and drinking and marrying. Jesus was rather well known for his enthusiastic participation in eating and drinking and marriage feasts. But what he is warning us about is just going about our business oblivious to the changes that are needed and the changes that are coming. Those people who were eating and drinking and marrying as though nothing else mattered had Noah for a neighbour, and Noah was building a bloody big lifeboat in his front yard for everyone to see, and he was telling anyone who cared to ask why. But it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.

So be prepared, says Jesus, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” And to reinforce the point, Jesus makes it quite clear that he doesn't know what day it will be either,

which should make it clear that we are not called to be trying to work out when it will be. The unknownness is the point. You can't plan to turn your life around the day before his coming.

The other way this burglar image can be read is related but a bit different, and it is a bit more disturbing because it employs a stronger parallel between God and the burglar, but ultimately it is a message of promise and hope.

Jesus talks about the house being broken into by the burglar, and one of the words that we use to describe the coming of the messiah and his kingdom is an "inbreaking". The Messiah has to break in. The kingdom has to break through.

There was a story in the news a few years back about the bloke who was trying to brick up the opening of an old cellar under his house, and mistakenly bricked himself in. And then rather than break down the wall he had just built, he broke down the wall into his neighbour's cellar. Mighty neighbourly!

The image of the burglar is one who is crafty and scheming and who will stop at nothing to find a way of breaking through the defences and getting in. So is Jesus warning us to defend ourselves against God? No, of course not. But we are already mighty good at defending ourselves against God. Some people even use going to church as a way to defend themselves against God and against what God is calling them to.

So, to us who consciously or unconsciously defend ourselves against God and against God's claims on us, there is a promise here. God loves you too much to politely respect your 'no'. Like a scheming burglar who sees every security system as a challenge to be overcome, God will try every trick in the book to get through your defences and get your attention and call forth your response. Ultimately God will not force you by violating your right to choose, but God will try every which way to sneak around or break through your defences so as to open your eyes and get you to choose what is right.

So there is a warning in this image about the consequences of refusing to acknowledge God and being caught unprepared when the day of the Lord comes and all is put right, but there is also a promise. God will do whatever it takes to get through to you with the good news of God's love and desire for all that is right and good for you. God will do whatever it takes, even as shamelessly as a burglar will. Shiftiness. Trickery. Subterfuge. Disguise. Perhaps even sneaking in among us as a little baby that no one could ever suspect. Nah, God wouldn't be that sneaky, surely? Would he?

Acknowledgement

Some of the ideas and images in this sermon, especially in the latter sections, came from a 1998 sermon by the Revd Vaughn Crowe-Tipton