“Taken by Surprise”
Matthew 24:36–44
First Sunday of Advent

May the grace and peace of Advent be with us today and throughout the season. Amen.

Welcome to Advent, and welcome to the first Sunday of the new church year! There is, indeed, much to celebrate and consider this morning.

Before we dive in, let me mention the small blank notebook that I hope you picked up on the way in.

It’s nothing fancy. Just empty pages.
For now, think of it as a little canvas—
a pocket-sized space for anything that catches your attention this morning.
If a word strikes you, write it down.
If an image comes to mind, sketch it.
If nothing comes, doodle.
Or leave it blank.
No rules.

Just notice.

Because noticing is actually at the center of today’s Gospel.

Now, this passage from Matthew is not the cozy, soft-focus Advent reading we might hope for. Jesus, as we just heard, talks about people being “taken,” and no one knowing the day or the hour.

It’s the kind of language that can make us tighten up, livparticularly in today’s political climate. It's as if God’s arrival were something to fear.

Biblical scholars have debated for centuries what "taken" means here. Some say it means judgment. Others say it means salvation, being taken to be with Christ. There's a Greek word at work here—*paralambano*—which literally means "to take alongside," "to take into close association." It's a word of intimacy.

So, I want to invite us to hear this passage differently today.
Less like a warning… and more like a wink.
Less like fear… and more like surprise.

What if being “taken” isn’t about being seized?
What if it’s about being ***captivated***?

What if Advent is not a countdown to judgment, but an ***invitation*** to be interrupted by common magnificence. To be caught off-guard by God's quiet grace?

Think about those two people in the field. They're doing the same work, side by side. But one of them is truly present - taken by the gift of the morning, aware of the mystery of seeds and soil, awake to the presence of God in ordinary labor. The other is just going through the motions, thinking about something else, anywhere but here.

Two women grinding meal together. The same repetitive task. But one of them is taken - captivated by the rhythm, present to the ancient human work of making bread, aware that she's participating in something holy. The other woman is bored, disconnected, wishing she were somewhere else.

The call to be ready, to keep awake, isn't about anxiously scanning the skies for signs of the end times. It's about being fully present to the lives we're living right now. It's about allowing ourselves to be taken - captivated, enchanted - by the spectacle that's already here.

And this brings me to a question. One that might feel a little bold:

What if being prepared for God has nothing to do with being ready...
and everything to do with being *willing*?

Willing to be surprised. Willing to be interrupted. Willing to be taken - not by fear or anxiety, but by a moment of wonder, or beauty, or compassion.

The Gospel tells us that God's arrival is like a thief in the night. Not because God wants to frighten us, but perhaps because grace often enters through the places we've neglected:
a part of our life we've stopped tending, a relationship we've let go fallow, a corner of our spirit that's grown dim.

Songwriter Leonard Cohen reminds us, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Consider, perhaps, a part of your life that feels worn out or overlooked. A place you haven't visited in a while. A hope you've let fade. A practice that's been left untended.

Now imagine God painting something there. A color you wouldn't choose. A shape that surprises you. A small stroke of beauty in a place you didn't expect.

A reminder that God restores dignity, and hope, and vitality in the very places we thought were beyond repair.

Perhaps Jesus isn't trying to scare us today. Maybe, instead, he's trying to wake us up. Not to danger, but to ***possibility***.

To be “taken” by God is to be seized by awe. To be pulled toward compassion. To be invited into this world with clearer eyes and an open heart.

For indeed, the greatest interruption of all is on its way… God entering the world. Not with authority,
but with vulnerability; not in a palace, but in a borrowed stable; not with fear, but with love.

The Incarnation – ***Christmas!*** - is God’s own holy act of surprise and possibility.

Before I close, let’s return to the little notebook you picked up this morning. When we started, I suggested you might use it to note what caught your attention this morning - a phrase, a question, a sketch, a doodle.

Now I want to offer you a second suggestion. Take it home. Slip it into your coat pocket, or your purse, or the car. Bring it back next Sunday, if you remember.

Because maybe… Maybe, it could become an Advent journal. A place to write down the moments when something unexpected "takes" you: a kindness, a conversation, a bit of beauty, a question you can't shake. But also, the harder things: a memory tinged with grief, an awareness of suffering you cannot ignore, a longing for someone who won't be at the table this Christmas, a regret that won’t let go.

Advent holds both the darkness and the light, and God meets us in both. Sometimes we're taken by wonder, sometimes by sorrow. Both are invitations to presence, to honesty, to the belief that God enters into all of it—the joy and the ache alike.

Let the recognition of these moments help us abide in ***this*** season of blessing, rather than rushing to the next.

Because this is how God typically arrives — not with trumpets, but with small invitations to take notice.

In a dozen words, the poet Mary Oliver sums up my prayer for us this Advent:

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

Amen.