

Our hope in the dark:

Being left behind with Jesus

MUC Fellowship@10, 30 November 2025

Alison Sampson, reflecting on Matthew 24:36-44

A mix up of metaphors on sleeping and waking, taking and leaving, and hoping against hope in the dark. But first, a story.

My friend came home from school one day and found the house empty. His mother was visiting with the neighbour, but my friend didn't know that. He walked around that empty house calling, 'Mum? Mu-um!! MUM!!!' No reply. My friend went up the stairs and checked the bedrooms. No mum. He checked the bathroom, the linen closet, the laundry. Still no mum. He went out into the garden and checked front and back, then he checked the shed. Nothing. Once he realised that she really wasn't there, he collapsed into a foetal position, sobbing. His worst fear had been realised: the rapture had happened, his mother had been taken, and he'd been left behind.

This is a true story, and it happened in some version or another to several of my friends. It should not surprise you when I say that none of them are church-goers now. For they were taught a violent and vindictive God who takes a few, but leaves the rest to burn in the fires of hell. That such a God is incompatible with the self-giving forgiving Christ we met last week doesn't seem to register, for in today's passage Jesus seems to preach this same hellfire theology. 'One will be taken, and one will be left,' he says. It sounds terrifying.

And yet. Jesus says that in the days of Noah, people were 'eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, right until the day Noah entered the ark.' In other words, they were going about their ordinary lives, doing all the ordinary things. Food shopping, meal prep, dinnertime. Gathering with family and friends. Planning for a future, raising kids, hoping for grandchildren. Living as if everything was just fine. Yet if we know the story of Noah, we know that things weren't fine at all. In fact, 'the earth was corrupt and full of violence,' and the people were responsible. They broke covenant; they grasped and grabbed; they engaged in sexual abuse, sexual

violence (Genesis 6). And while all this was going on, 'It's all good,' they said. Business as usual. Eyes wide shut.

This disconnection between the way they lived and God's vision of wholeness for the world broke God's heart. Indeed, the story goes that God became so distraught that God decided to undo creation and begin again. So God planned a great flood to sweep away both people and the earth, yet the people went about their business wilfully oblivious until the flood was upon them.

Only Noah and his family were left behind. It's like a visit from a Demogorgon in *Stranger Things*: one will be taken, one will be left. It's like drone flights over Afghanistan: one will be taken, one will be left. It's like settler attacks on Palestinian territories: one will be taken, one will be left. It's like a raid by ICE agents: one will be taken, one will be left. It's like DHHS checks on an Indigenous family: one will be taken, one will be left.

Can you hear it? Being left behind might be the better option. Indeed, for Noah and his family, being left behind meant being part of God's new creation. Turning back to Jesus, 'When the Human One arrives,' he says, 'two will be working; one will be taken, one will be left.' He doesn't spell out who's doing the taking or what it all means. Instead, he leaves us to wonder.

My friend's church concluded that we'd either be whisked away to heaven or left behind to face the fires of hell, and taught its children so. But that's not in this story. Instead, these are theological assumptions being read back into it. Given Jesus has just recalled the Noah story, perhaps being left behind means being left behind with Jesus, ready to participate in a world made new?

Matthew is writing at a time when being a follower of Jesus was a big problem. His followers had been expelled by the synagogues. Jesus himself had been executed by the state, Jerusalem had been sacked, and death squads were roaming the streets. One will be taken, one will be left and the Jesus we encounter in Matthew reinterprets the apocalyptic tradition so that it is not God doing the violence, but humans. Of course, this violence is only possible because most people keep their heads down and live as if everything is just fine. They say, 'It's all good.' Business as usual. Eyes wide shut.

But Jesus calls on his followers to stay awake. Be ready at all times, for nobody knows when the Human One will arrive. What does staying awake and being ready mean? Well, again and again Jesus rejects business as usual.

Instead he requires his followers to look on the world with clarity and compassion. In the face of social turmoil, he demands that they reject the patterns of scapegoating, vengeance, and violence. When someone slaps you, he says, turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Care for the vulnerable. Don't be afraid. Build peace. He urges his disciples not to be swept up by the mob, but to stand firm in the ways of his kingdom-culture. Then he models it.

So when his disciples are swept away by rage at an inhospitable Samaritan town and beg to call down heavenly fire, Jesus is left behind. He rebukes his disciples then tells the story of a good Samaritan who cares for a wounded traveller. In the face of their xenophobic hatred, he insists that Samaritans are good neighbours and role models for their faith.

When a whole town is swept away by pious outrage at a woman caught in adultery, Jesus is left behind. He asks a question which disarms the mob and turns them from their violence. They slowly drift away one-by-one until only the woman is left behind with Jesus.

When religious types are swept away by self-righteousness, criticising Jesus for healing on the sabbath and for spending time with sinners, Jesus is left behind. In the face of their hostility, he offers only hospitality and wholeness.

When the crowd is swept away by hatred and demands Jesus' death, he is again left behind. He insists his kingdom is not of this world, for if it was his disciples would have taken up arms and defended him. (John 18:36). Then, as he is abandoned to die on the cross, he forgives them all.

In this spirit, I suggest that when the anti-trans hate machine swings into action and tries to sweep us away, Jesus might say, 'Stay woke! Be left behind with the vulnerable, and with me.' When anti-Jewish anti-Palestinian anti-burka anti-African gangs rhetoric floods our airwaves and tries to sweep us away, Jesus might say, 'Stay woke! Be left behind with the foreigner, and with me.' When in an orgy of fear the lust for 'adult time for adult crime' tries to sweep us away, Jesus might say, 'Stay woke! Be left behind with the person called sinner, and with me.' Don't be caught up by the vicious rhetoric, the scapegoating, the impulse to violence. Instead, pay attention to the patterns of this world, how vulnerable people are used as pawns to unite and direct the crowd. Notice, but don't participate. Instead, align yourself

with the vulnerable, risk your own reputation, learn to love that which you fear, stand firm in the ways of peace.

This is, of course, difficult. It's so much easier to maintain 'it's all good!' and get on with ordinary life. It's so much easier to be comfortable than to align with the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalised. And it's so difficult to acknowledge the ways we ourselves might be complicit in other people's harm. That sort of solidarity is costly. You might get swept away yourself.

Think about it, Jesus might say, twisting the taking metaphor. If you knew when the thief was coming, you would have barricaded your doors rather than have your prejudices taken away. You would have sat up all night with a baseball bat rather than risk relinquishing certainty. You would have installed a burglar alarm to protect what you already have and think you know. You would have done anything to avoid the thief, the stranger, the unsettling interruption to your comfortable religion, the demand to change your life: but if you want any part in me, he says, you've got to be ready.

Yet we are human; sleep is necessary. We cannot stay awake forever. So we might turn the metaphor again and conclude: when we are most vulnerable and least expect it, the Human One will indeed come and take something away. And in the vacancy, the opening, the creation of space in the dwelling, the Christ child will find room. When this happens, wake up! notice it. Nurture it. Let it grow. For when Christ dwells in us, we become safe in Noah's ark, citizens of the kingdom of heaven, left behind to work and pray God's new creation into being.

The apostle Paul assures us that 'salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.' (Romans 13:11). So let us turn the metaphor one last time. Let us lie down this night in hopeful anticipation that the thief will come in the darkest hour, and let us rise tomorrow with a newfound emptiness that can be filled only by Christ.

Come Thief, take away our fear. Come Love, take away our hate. Come Light, take away our wilful obliviousness. Come Spirit, find a dwelling-place in every one of us. For Christ alone is our hope in the dark: come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen. Ω