

Always a Guest

Speaking of Faith Far from Home

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Preface

On Being a Guest

When I left parish ministry twenty years earlier than expected, my preaching life was born again. This came as a surprise, since there was general agreement among my clergy friends that guest preaching was a lame gig. It was something people with no congregation did, filling in on a random Sunday for a preacher who was ill or away on vacation, or serving as a placeholder while a search committee did its job. It meant working hard on a sermon for people you did not know, but who knew each other well, which explained why it was so easy to make their eyebrows fly up when you said something that did not meet code, or pressed a bruise you did not know was there. Guest preaching was for people who didn't have a real preaching job.

Some of this was true. Once, when a charming clergy friend decided it would be fun for me to preach at his church while an assistant minister covered for me at mine, I failed to ask several important questions. Did he stand behind the pulpit when he preached or did he walk around? Did he use a manuscript when he spoke or did he look straight into people's eyes? How long were his sermons, usually? But even if I had remembered to ask, his answers would not have helped. Afterward, as I stood shaking hands at the door, a small woman with bright eyes and tan cheeks said, with genuine pity, "I'm sorry. It's just that we love Sam."

I tucked that wisdom away and pulled it out years later when I was always and only a guest. Always ask questions. Remember they love their pastor. Don't pretend to be something you're not. My real job was teaching college by then, which freed up my weekends for the first time in decades. Invitations came and I accepted them, learning to preach in a whole new way.

The first gift of guest preaching was the loosening of denominational bonds. I learned how to wait for the Spirit to move in a Pentecostal church, even if it meant the sermon started late and ended even later. I learned that thirty minutes was about right for Baptists and too long for Lutherans. I spoke in gymnasiums, under tents, on stages, and in cafeterias, without any familiar furniture or forms of worship. The disorientation was dazzling. None of my Episcopal lingo worked. I had to reach for language that lived closer to the heart of common Christian experience.

There were also invitations from college and university chapels, which caused me to test the age limits of my resources. Some of my favorite books were written when I was in college, which made them grandparent-age for a twenty-first-century sophomore. This worked fine with older congregations, but a chapel full of young people—even those required to be there—deserved a new review of culture and media. The gift of being their guest led me to discover new authors, musicians, bloggers, filmmakers, performance artists, and podcast hosts who woke me up to new ways of communicating with people of any age.

The most surprising gift was the freedom to preach without fear of being fired—or, if not fired, at least roundly criticized with apparent relish. Since I have been married to a churchgoer for a long time, I know that criticizing the sermon is a group sport that can be carried out with no real malice toward the preacher (though this distinction is often lost on the preacher). Being a guest doesn't prevent it from happening. The difference is that both my listeners and I know it's a one-shot deal, freeing us both to say and think things we might not otherwise have said or thought. Since someone responsible has invited me, I am presumably safe but still unpredictable, like the babysitter who

shows up with steel darts and a dartboard instead of a Monopoly game. If all goes well, I might be invited back. If not, I won't. Either way, there's no lasting harm. The great thing about guests is that they go home.

What I value most about speaking of faith far from home is that I have to travel light. I don't know my hosts well. There are so many ways of being Christian that I don't even know for sure how the worship service will go. I certainly don't know who the pillars of the church are, or the troublemakers, or what kind of a week they have all had. I don't know what turns a stranger's speech into a sermon for them. I don't know what they depend on it to do. All of these uncertainties unpack my bags until there are only a few things left: a sacred text, a trust in the Spirit, an experience of being human, and the desire to bear good news.

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When I worry that won't be enough, I remember there may be another guest in the congregation that day—someone who didn't mean to come to church but turned in at the last minute, or came to placate a relative, or please a friend. They don't know the same things I don't know. They too are traveling light. They are starting where I'm starting, with the desire for something to happen this morning that will make a difference.

The only thing I know that the other guest may not know is that something does happen, over and over again, in the most surprising ways. Sometimes it's a praise dance and sometimes it's a descant by the choir on the last verse of a hymn. Sometimes it's a spontaneous baptism and sometimes it's an old couple holding each other up on their way to take Communion. I hate to say it, but it's rarely the sermon, at least not all by itself. Whether there's a guest in the

pulpit or a pastor who knows everyone by name, that person's job is to do what any person sitting in front of them could do: give voice to the faith that is in them, and trust God to do the rest.

How to Live with High Anxiety

Luke 21:25–28

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

—Luke 21:25–26

Good morning, church. If you’re visiting today, as I am, there are a couple of things you need to know right here at the start, because I’m your flight attendant and we’re in for a bumpy ride. The turbulence is predictable, since there are two different weather patterns that always collide on the first Sunday of Advent.

The first is a happy high-pressure front. Today is New Year’s Day for Christians—the first Sunday of the new church year—which sets our sights on the birth of the Messiah four weeks from now. Good news! The Christ is coming! It’s time to get the nursery ready and reorder your priorities, because every urgent thing in your life is about to kneel before the one important thing that wants to be born anew in you: Emmanuel, which is to say: the God in you, the God in the person sitting next to you, the God with us, above us, below us, and among us, willing to be made

known through us, and at the same time willing to become small enough to hold in our arms. This baby's on the way.

You'd expect champagne to be served on such a flight, but the happy high-pressure front is only one of the strong currents under our wings today. The other is a stormy low-pressure front, causing the captain to see strange things out the window. Christ is still coming, but in a cloud this time. Cabin service has been suspended due to the apocalypse, and we're all sitting in exit rows. You don't remember saying you would assist in case of an emergency? I'm afraid it's too late to change seats now. You, me, Emmanuel—we're all buckled in and we're all in this together. This morning's Gospel is our wake-up call, and it may take a while to hear the good news in it.

You just heard one version of it from Luke's Gospel. The back-story is that Jesus was in the Temple in Jerusalem. There were a bunch of people standing around, remarking on what a grand place it was, and how grand it was for them to be there. If it was anything like the Washington National Cathedral in DC, then the place was so packed with people trying to get a good angle with their selfie sticks that no one could see much of anything else. Or maybe it was the sheer size of the place that stunned them. The last time I was at the Cathedral, a guide told me you could lay the Washington Monument down the center aisle for an almost perfect fit. The place is that big.

Whatever version of that was going on inside the Temple, Jesus was irritated by it: the wealth, the splendor, the gawking. It all seemed so wrong to him that he decided it was the perfect teaching moment. Before people could head down to the gift shop for a souvenir postcard and talk about where to go to lunch, he said something loud enough for those standing around him to hear. Don't get too attached, he said, because it's all coming down (21:5).

Since it's easy to doze while you're listening to a familiar translation, here is another one from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* that may be different enough to win a fresh hearing. First, Jesus says,

“It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

“And then—then!—they’ll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!” (Luke 21:25–28, MSG)

A few verses later, he continues:

“But be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.” (vv. 34–36 MSG)

Earth and sea in an uproar. Global panic. The threat of doom. The powers quaking. I don’t know about you, but I don’t need much reminding about such things. I hear them on the radio every morning. I hear them on the news every night. I read about them on the front page of both newspapers that come to my house. I see them in the previews at the movie theater.

Earlier this week I was at a Catholic school of theology in San Antonio, where a professor asked if I had heard about the Hallmark explosion. Given some of the terrible things that have been in the headlines lately, I thought he meant an actual explosion.

“Oh, no!” I said, trying to think where Hallmark’s headquarters were. “Was anyone hurt?” But he meant the *ratings* had exploded. Over the last two years, the Hallmark TV channel has zoomed to the top tier of cable channels with offerings such as *Love Comes Softly*, *In My Dreams*, and *Where the Heart*

Is. As different as these dramas are, what they have in common are happy endings. The characters in them do the right thing. Problems are resolved without anyone getting hurt. Sweethearts finally get together in the end. A month ago, Hallmark's network ratings surpassed CNN's. Now that December's here, the Christmas lineup will put Hallmark neck and neck with Fox and ESPN.

I totally get it. At my house, it's either *The Crown* or a frontier Western, depending on who gets to the TV clicker first. On *Longmire*, when Sheriff Walt finally exhausts all peaceful means and unholsters his pistol to let a bad guy have it, my husband, Ed, turns to me and says, "I'm sorry, but that guy needed to be dead."

We're living in scary times. With or without newspaper subscriptions, social media, and live streaming, it's hard to imagine anyone who can avoid the palpable anxiety that pervades our culture. It comes up in texts, in telephone conversations—even around dinner tables on nights out with friends. Something as slight as a see-through straw can conjure the image of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, with its 79,000 tons of floating plastic. Mention the midterm elections during the appetizers and you'll be talking about the end of Western democracy by dessert.

There are a lot of ways people handle their anxiety, and the Hallmark Channel is probably the most benign. Shopping also works for some people; gin and sedatives for others. But since we're in a church this morning, there is good reason to return to the Gospel teaching for its clues to how Christians have lived with their anxiety from the start.

Best guess is that Luke's Gospel dates to the last decades of the first century, which means that he had lived through the end of his world a couple of times over—not just the crucifixion of Jesus, but also the executions of Peter, James, and Paul; the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem; Nero's persecution of the early church; and perhaps even the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE, which rocked the ancient world with 100,000 times more

thermal energy than the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

Luke was not an eyewitness to *all* of these things. Like us, he got most of his headlines from a distance, but doomsday was not lurking somewhere in the future for him. It was past; it was present. It was the reality in which he wrote his Gospel, doing his best to set down the saving news of Jesus for those who were caught up in it too.

How did Jesus speak to their anxiety? Most importantly, I think, he did not tell them to cut it out. “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,” he said. *Who could have known that better than him?* Terrible things happen, and you would have to be made out of metal instead of flesh to be fearless in the face of what might happen next. Jesus knew that. On one of the lowest nights of his life, he asked to be spared from what was coming next. “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.” At the same time, he knew that wasn’t his call. “Yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

This is a lifesaver: to know that the one we call Lord and Savior also knew fear and foreboding. He was made of tender flesh just like we are. Even he had to learn what could be changed and what could not. If his courage was superior to ours, it wasn’t because he was anxiety-free but because he kept moving in spite of it.

He also knew that God was up to something that involved breaking before it involved mending, which means that the terrible things were not all coming from the enemy. That tumult Jesus was warning people about—uproar, panic, doom—it wasn’t being caused by some malignant assault from the underworld, but by the gravitational pull of the kingdom of God drawing near. “Now when these things begin to take place,” Jesus said, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (21:28).

This is mind-bending for those of us who think we know what redemption looks like, who believe we are competent to judge whether something is coming from the enemy or from God. But

there you have it: Jesus' lifesaving news is that our redemption is embedded in the things that cause us the greatest anxiety.

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To go back to my flight metaphor for a moment, you might think about the last time you hit some really rough air—rough enough to make one of the overhead compartments pop open, maybe, or at least to make you grab your armrests and look around to see if anyone else looks as frightened as you feel. The minute you realize there is nothing you can do about any of this, your priorities can change fast. The humanity of the person in the seat next to you can become as precious to you as your own. Her survival can become inseparable from yours. Then the plane evens out and you both go back to reading your magazines. But I'll tell you what: there's nothing like some big-time turbulence to teach you how to pray. You can learn about what really matters to you in a moment like that, which has nothing to do with losing your luggage or making it to your next meeting on time.

Since Jesus isn't attached to the same things we are, he can take the God-view, which is about more than redeeming our individual lives. God means to redeem the *world*, which is going to require some major teardowns before the global renewal project can go forward. In this view there is some divine bulldozing to be done, some cosmic asbestos removal to be completed, before the world is safe for God's creation to live in again. All the systems, powers, and economies that keep us separated into first class and coach—they're already doomed. All the tribal politics that thrive on making us fear and loathe each other, every kind of religion that demonizes the stranger or violates the young—it's all coming down.

Jesus won't soften the message, but he does re-brand it. When you see these things begin to take place, he says, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. That's not Satan coming in the cloud, or your most despised politician,

or the mother of all hurricanes. It's him—the Son of Man—coming in power and great glory. If you can let that in—even a little—then you have opened the door for God to sanctify your anxiety.

The last thing Luke records Jesus as saying today is that it's really important not to let our worries make us check out. That's something else he knows about us—how likely we are to lie down when it's time to stand up, to cover our heads when it's time to raise them. When the turbulence gets really bad, it's tempting to retire from as much reality as you can. You know how it works. Lower the room-darkening shades and settle in for a full season of some world other than your own on your giant screen. Cover the bed with mail-order catalogs and empty pizza boxes. Do anything that works to take your mind off what's really going on.

Some people even use church to take their minds off reality, but none of us have come here for hot chocolate this morning. We have come for the kind of truth we're not getting anywhere else in our lives, and as hard as it may sometimes be to hear, Jesus promises it will save our lives—because the one who comes to us first as the Son of Mary in a manger comes again as the Son of Man in a cloud—not just once, but over and over again.

Luke thought the world was coming to an end in his time. Grave-diggers during the Black Plague were sure it was happening in theirs. Soldiers in the Great War thought they were living in the last days. During the last hours of 1999, millions of people prepared for doom as the clock swept toward Y2K. Maybe the end is always coming at us, in some form or another, so that every generation gets some practice at apocalypse before we pass away. That's what Jesus says, anyway. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (21:32–33).

This is the heart of his teaching about how to live with anxiety. While everything else in heaven and on earth is bound to come to an end, his words will not. They will go on making sounds even if there is no one left to hear them. In the meantime, there is a deathlessness about them that holds out its hands to us, giving us a way to live even when we are scared to death.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:27–31)

When the babe is born a few weeks from now, he won't be nearly that articulate. All he'll be able to do is cry for his mother Mary's milk, and maybe curl his fingers around one of Joseph's. But these words will be forming in him, along with many others, so that when he speaks them at last we will not only be able to hear them coming out of his mouth but also see them leafing out in his life—a way of life he commends to us too. It is the kind of life we can live in, through, and beyond the headlines, while we stand up—wide awake and full of purpose—to take part in the coming of God's reign at last.

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