

Waiting for whom? (*Matthew 24:36-44*)

"Whom are you trying to catch?" I asked my roommate. "Probably nobody," he said.

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After the fall break of his sophomore year, my residence hall neighbor, Tom, returned to college with a brand new electric guitar.

It was a limited-edition instrument, modeled after one a then-deceased rock star had made famous in the 1970s. It was the fruit of three sizzling summers spent laboring in the corn fields of central Illinois, and he was quite proud to be its owner.

At first, that meant he and the instrument didn't spend much time apart. He'd walk our hall's floor with the guitar's leather strap slung over his shoulder, always ready to flip it to his waist and serenade his neighbors with unplugged arpeggios accentuated by the contorting of his face.

By the time the snow started falling, however, Tom's course load had become more of a priority. His shoulder was then adorned instead with the padded nylon of his backpack, and he wore the look of someone who always had somewhere else to be.

The Saturday before finals, I stopped by his room to see if he'd like to join me for lunch in the dining hall.

"It's open!" Tom yelled upon hearing my rapping on his steel door.

I entered and walked around the corner to find him sitting on the floor, with his guitar on a stand in front of him. He was holding a box of toothpicks and placing them on end, one-by-one, into the pile of the carpet around his prized instrument. There were probably 200 of them teetering about in the blue shag.

“It’s a trap,” he said with a sinister laugh and retrieved another pointy fragment of birch from the box, leaning toward the still-open spaces with a strategic eye.

I let loose a chuckle before quickly covering my mouth with my hands. I wondered if I’d stumbled into something that was comical or clinical. Had the stress of his impending exams just unleashed Tom’s sense of humor? Maybe, in fact, it had gotten the better of him.

So I asked, “Whom are you trying to catch, Tom?”

“Probably nobody,” he said to my relief.

“But,” he said with a smile, “I sure will be ready for them when they’re here!”

He resumed setting the tiny sentinels where they might keep watch for nobody, probably.

Every year, I find myself wrestling with the apocalyptic overtones of Advent. If I’m honest, it is much simpler for me to place the weight of the season’s waiting on the faith’s collective memory instead of its present or future. There, Advent becomes a moment of liturgical empathy: sitting with an ancient people’s legacy of longing; yearning with those whose answer came in the one whom I follow.

I know Jesus commands me to be watchful, but the eschatological “not yet” to which he points was so long ago that its arrival seems as ridiculous as Tom’s toothpicks. Probably.

Yet, as I listen to the sacred stories of the faithful and skeptical alike, that legacy of longing doesn’t seem to have been quenched in the Christmas arrival of Jesus. There remains a pain far deeper than the straw in his manger bed; a woundedness that even the Easter encore didn’t heal; a trouble the most powerful among us cannot imagine reliving.

I want to believe the God of Jesus values our present selves just as much as the ones we might become. So, behind closed doors, I sit with those whom I trust God loves. I sit on the floor, quite foolishly, waiting to catch a return of the one who might

redeem us again.