

## **Catch me if You can, Lord!**

Matthew 24:36-44

A sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent

Many people know the 2002 movie, "Catch me if you can." It's the true story of a twenty-one year old young man, a skilled forger, who passes himself off as a doctor, a lawyer, a pilot and the FBI agent who pursues this young man over the course of several years.

There is also a children's game: "Catch me if you can." It's similar to tag and hide and seek.

We play this game with God as well. Most of all, it's a game of good works. The whole New Testament is full of exhortations to do good works. It says in the Sermon on the Mount: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). It's not only there but is found throughout the New Testament. In 1 Peter 1:15-16: "As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (Leviticus 11:44). It's the same in Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:21.

"Well," we say, "being a Christian is about doing the best we can. God, you have to measure me according to how I decide I should be measured, my own sense of myself." Or: "I'm not perfect, but I'm better than others."

But the text says: "Be perfect." That means not only the sins you have done, but also those things you should have done and didn't. You've put off a lot and haven't gotten around to doing what you know you should do. The text says 100%.

And we say, "Well, Lord, catch me if you can."

We go on to the second game. If we took a survey, it would say what everybody thinks or the majority thinks. And the Lord says, "You mean to tell me that what the Lord is about is decided by survey?"

We go to the third game. We say: "But Lord, you know I have needs. You have to fulfill my needs the way I understand my needs. You, Lord, have to convince me according to the way I see things. And you have to let me be myself the way I understand I have to be myself. You have to give me the feeling the way I feel I should be feeling. I'm going to worship you in my own way."

And the Lord says: "Who do you think you are? God? You're setting conditions for God? After all, I made you. You belong to me." And we say: "Catch me if you can."

In the fourth game we say: "Well, there's science." And the Lord says: "I made it all. I made science." Then there's the question of evolution, and the Lord says: "I use evolution. Can you explain to me why there is order rather than chaos?" We answer: "Catch me if you can."

There is also "interpretation." The Lord says: "I interpret interpretation." And we say: "Catch me if you can."

Finally, we say: "O.K. Lord, I give up. If you want me to think nice thoughts about you, I will. Three in one and one in three, whatever it is, I'll say it." And the Lord says: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). We answer: "Catch me if you can."

If we go on with this understanding of games, this is not a "think" game but a "do" game. This is not about thinking about God and how that might be. This is about how God works, what God does, and what he says. He says: "I work my way. I work by coming in a manger as a babe. I work in the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. That's how I work."

That means it's not about worshipping God my way. Not privately. Not on TV. Not on the mountain top. The Lord says: "I act in the preaching of the Word and the giving of the sacraments and not elsewhere."

And we say: "Well, the preacher doesn't convince me." And the Lord says: "It's not the job of the preacher to convince you. The job of the preacher is to proclaim the gospel and your job is to hear it."

We say: "Catch me if you can." And the Lord laughs. And when he laughs, it's not the jolly laugh of Santa Claus, it's the laugh of Psalm 2:4, which is a way of saying: "You think you can play games with God?"

Our text for today is on John the Baptist. He is mentioned in all four gospels. To whom is John the Baptist speaking? It's very specifically said to whom he is speaking. He's not speaking to the ragged and the poor. He's speaking to the nice people, like you and me, the good people. What does he say? The translators of Matthew and Luke diminish the edges of this verse, "You brood of vipers!" (Matt 3:7, Luke 3:7). It should read: "You're a bunch of snakes! Repent!"

And we mumble: "Yes, of course, repent. O.K."

Remember it says: "Be holy. 100%."

Matthew 3:7 says: "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He's coming to separate the wheat from the chaff, and Matt 3:12 states: "The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Where is our hope?

Our hope is stated by John the Baptist in John 1:29: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." On this Sunday every year we are reminded of the painting by Grünewald in which John the Baptist is forever pointing to the dying Christ on the cross.

Christmas is really about Good Friday and Easter. He came as a babe. Yes, the One who created and made everything comes truly to be one of us in order that he could die and rise again to conquer sin, death, and evil. Thank God.

We say: "But Lord, you can't do it this way!" And the Lord says: "This is how I work. This is how I have done it. This is how I am doing it, through the Word, through coming to you in the proclamation and the sacraments."

It is all summed up by Paul, making use of an early Christian hymn, Philippians 2:5-11:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, **even death on a cross.**

"**Therefore** God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Amen

(Pastors: As you know, the psalms are in parallel lines. But here Paul added "even death on the cross," breaking the parallelism.)