

Sermon for Advent I Year A 2019
The Divine Thief

Have you ever wondered how congregations are named?
How, for instance a group of people decide to
establish a church on the corner of,
oh, let's say, Hamilton Avenue and Burton Avenue
in Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey.
They are in touch with their denomination's leaders in their state
and fill out all the papers to incorporate and adopt a church
constitution and then . . . there is the meeting when they have to
propose the name of their congregation, their church.
How do you think such a meeting proceeds?
Is it a meeting of the "inner-circle,"
or a meeting of all the soon-to-be members of the new church?
I happen to know a little piece of history of how this
congregation named itself.
Apparently, nearly 100 years ago,
the name of this church was first proposed
to be "Morning Star Lutheran Church."
Some of you may already be saying to yourselves—as I heard
one person say out loud when I told them this historical fact—
"Thank God, they didn't name us that!"
Apparently, some people think Morning Star
is a reference to Satan—based very loosely on a verse in
Isaiah and a statement in the gospel of Luke,
meanwhile in the book of Revelation,
Jesus refers to himself as the Morning Star
and the second letter of Peter calls Christ "the Morning Star."

Obviously that first nomination didn't grab people's imagination—perhaps for the very same reasons I just mentioned. It was put a full future member vote which was nearly a tie. But the nays had a few more votes than the ayes, and it was back to the drawing board—or the naming board, as the case may be. Perhaps in order to have a more successful second vote, the safer name of “Holy Trinity” was put forward and . . . here we are today.

Generally, Lutheran congregations are named for one of the apostles or a name or title for Christ. Like . . . Messiah Lutheran Church, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Our Savior Lutheran Church Emmanuel Lutheran Church . . . but . . . I bet you never heard of a “Divine Thief” Lutheran Church, right? And, yet, that's exactly how Jesus describes himself in the parable this morning . . . as like a thief in the night.

Here we are, on the first Sunday in Advent – most of us are thinking of Advent wreaths with purple and pink candles, or cozy nativity scenes, or pull-tab calendars with chocolates tucked inside. I doubt any of us are thinking thoughts of Advent that include a thief prowling outside our house, stealthy and silent— or imagining our front door torn off its hinges, shattered glass in the foyer, a stranger's footsteps on your stairs?

What about your most prized possessions disappearing while you sleep?

Quite frankly, do any of these images seem “Advent-ish” to you?

They certainly don’t to me.

And yet . . . these are the images our gospel reading for this first Sunday of Advent gives us.

A homeowner caught off guard.

A house that’s been broken into.

The Son of Man coming at an unexpected hour, like a thief in the night.

There’s no way around it – these images are disturbing.

Maybe even terrifying.

They don’t jibe with the Jesus we think we know –

the sweet, gentle baby Jesus in the manger,

the Jesus who feeds and forgives and heals and saves,

the Good Shepherd, or

the Jesus on the cross.

The Jesus we hear from in this apocalyptic passage in Matthew is no respecter of boundaries.

He’s not invested in the status quo;

he doesn’t care about always keeping us secure and comfortable;

and he’s not thwarted at all

by our elaborate defense mechanisms.

The Jesus we meet in this parable in Matthew is described as an invader,

an intruder,

a disrupter,

. . . a criminal!

So what should we do with a Son of Man
(our Messiah, our Savior, our Redeemer, our Emmanuel,
our Morning Star) who describes himself as a robber?
How should we respond to a Jesus who shows up—
un-invited and unexpected—
and *takes away things from us?*
Things we care about.
Things we depend on.
Things we are 100% sure we can't live without.

Well, here are three possibilities of how we might think
differently about Advent this year—

First, we should recognize that we are asleep.
Jesus likes the coming of the Son of Man
to the days of Noah and the flood.
“Before the flood they were eating and drinking,
marrying and giving in marriage,” Jesus says.
“They knew nothing until the flood came
and swept them all away.”

It's so hard—so very, very hard—
to accept the fact that we're not awake,
that we're missing profound spiritual realities
because we are fast asleep in the same old, same old.
We want to believe that the status quo will save us.
We want to believe that “business-as-usual” will be good
enough to keep us attuned to God.

More than anything else,
we want to pretend that Christianity—
that being a disciple of the Messiah,
the Savior, the Redeemer, the Morning Star—
will never require anything difficult or costly of us.

And yet.

And yet, the message of Advent is,
“Wake up!!”

The message from the texts today is,

Do you know what time it is?

Do you have any idea how late it is?

Keep watch!

The hour is near!

The call of the season is to recognize that we’re not paying
attention to what really matters.

The call of the season is for us to confess that we are alive
and yet dangerously unaware, numbed, asleep.

The second thing we need to recognize this morning is
we should surrender our certainties.

The implication of the thief-in-the night analogy

is that Jesus isn’t going to come

in the ways we may expect him to.

If we think we have our Christian faith pinned down,

if we think we know what revelation looks like—

which is the meaning of apocalypse—

if we think we have Jesus all figured out,

then we are in for a rather unpleasant surprise.

If, on the other hand,
We approach with our hearts,
our minds, and our hands wide open,
if we confess that we don't even know what to look for
or where to look for it—
if we empty ourselves of all preconceived notions of God
and train our hearts to expect the unexpected,
then we will be able to receive the real Jesus
with joy when he appears.

The third thing we need to recognize is this:
We should prepare to be robbed.

During Advent, we are called to make room
for the long-anticipated Christ, the Messiah.
To prepare space for the beautiful new life that is coming—
the life of our Lord, our Savior, our Redeemer,
our Emmanuel, our Morning Star.
But how can we do this if we're already filled to the rafters?
Maybe Jesus breaks in
because our valuables have become liabilities
and we need an intruder to sweep in
and take away what we won't willingly give up.

What are we clinging to that Jesus needs to steal?
Our apathy?
Our self-righteousness?
Our fears and anxieties?
Our unforgiveness?

It's no coincidence that Jesus describes coming to us when we are asleep, when we are vulnerable. When else would we relinquish the false gods we cling to? How else would we cooperate with the deep work God wants to do in, with, and through our lives? (Stay tuned, because on the fourth Sunday of Advent you'll hear how this is how God works through a man named Joseph.)

In a sermon entitled, "The Face in the Sky," theologian Frederick Buechner describes the Incarnation (that is the Word made flesh), as a kind of scandal— one that requires us to ponder the shocking unpredictability of God. Buechner states, [Because of the Incarnation, because of "Immanuel"— *Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of God again. Once they have seen him in the stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too.*

What do you and I make of this?
The God who is limitless chooses limits—
one womb,
one backwater town,
one bygone century,
one brief life,
one agonizing death.
The salvation—the Messiahship or Kingship
he brings is not the salvation or Messiah-Kingship
we long for or expect.
Like the disciples of old,
we long for a power-rangers type Messiah—
one who will raise up a powerful nation, a kingdom,
that will stand over and against all others.
No . . . that is most definitely *not*
the kingdom this Messiah-King brings.
He comes in humility, in self-giving,
sacrificial love and mercy—
he comes as servant to the servants.

These are not easy or comfortable truths to accept.
They are truths to wrestle with long and hard.
In other words, if we are not at least slightly bewildered
and on the edge of our seats,
then we haven't been paying attention.

Though I have been a lifelong Lutheran,
the church I grew up in didn't follow
the liturgical calendar all that closely—
So, I didn't grow up observing Advent as a child as I do now.

As I moved deeper into the liturgical tradition as a young adult,
I have come to love the holy season we are entering today.
I love that the church begins its new year
when the days are still getting darker.
I love that the season rejects
shallow sentimentality and false cheer.
And I love that the gospel gets us started with images that startle
me out of my complacency—not with swaddling clothes,
twinkling stars, and fleecy lambs—
but with Jesus as a relentless pursuer of the treasure of my soul.
Jesus as a divine, saving, redeeming,
Word-made-flesh, Morning Star thief.

Flannery O'Connor, the great southern American novelist wrote,
“To the hard of hearing you shout,
and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures.”
That is precisely what Jesus does in this morning’s wake-up call.
He shouts,
he draws startling figures,
and he uses every rhetorical device at his disposal
to snap us—his listeners—to attention.
Be on guard!
Be alert!
Stand up and raise your heads!
Wake up! Look! Hear!

These aren’t the soothing, saccharine invitations
we prefer to accept as we shop for gifts
or decorate our homes and Christmas trees.
But *Advent begins in the dark.*
It is not a season for the faint of heart (The Rev. Fleming Rutledge)

Whether we prefer it or not,
like them or not,
the invitations Advent offers us are hard-edged;
they don't look pretty on greeting cards.
Nevertheless . . . they are essential
and life-giving.
They help us to prepare for the birth that is almost at hand.
They help us stay alert.
And they help us receive Jesus—
our Messiah, our Emmanuel, our Redeemer,
our Morning Star,
our Divine Thief,
in all the shocking and scandalous ways he chooses to appear.