

“Nobody Expects A Christmas”
Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44
Advent 1 A
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In Monty Python's sketch, "The Spanish Inquisition," a man is being questioned in a way that catches him off guard and he says, "Mr. Wentworth just told me to come in here and say that there was trouble at the mill, that's all - I didn't expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition." On that cue, inquisitors burst into the room and one of them says, "*Nobody* expects the Spanish Inquisition! Our chief weapon is surprise. . . ." From there the sketch develops in typical Monty Python surreal outrageousness.¹

Nobody *expects* the Spanish Inquisition. "If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into." The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

The comparison between God and a thief in the night is more about surprise than menace. Thieves come by stealth, and not by prior announcement. Oh, and it is also important to note that our surprise is good, not dreaded. So surprising and good is it that it is hard to conceive of preparation adequate for this coming.

And so it is with our Advent. The season of preparation, hope, and expectation will never be adequate for the surprise. The poet Auden writes that "it's as if we had left our house for five minutes to mail a letter and during that time the living room had changed places with the room behind the mirror over the fireplace."² You can't live expecting that. The surprise overwhelms expectation. And that *is* our Advent.

So the usual exhortations to prepare during Advent are more well-intentioned than effective. Our actual expectations are for something quite different from his coming. For we have long since adjusted our lives to his absence. It is more of the same that we have become habituated. The readers of these words of Isaiah did the same thing. When these words of prophecy meet with the dissonance of what actually happens in the world, they appreciated the poetry of the words, but had long-since given up on their actually promising something.

¹ This sketch was rehearsed in Mary Hinkle, "The Element of Surprise," *Pilgrim Preaching*, November 28, 2004 at http://maryhinkle.typepad.com/pilgrim_preaching/2004/11/the_element_of_.html

² W. H. Auden, "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 273.

Have you looked out there? Surely there are more swords than ploughshares, more spears and pruning hooks. In fact, more swords and ploughshares are what you and I really expect. We have long since understood that if there is to be any saving surprise it will be of our own device and then, only “for the time being.” For we are used to loss, we are used to life being longer on bad surprises than good. Idealism will not save us. Nobody expects an intervention. So *we* are the ones who eat and drink, marry and give in marriage. Jesus’ metaphor that you and I are the householder invested in the way things are now is mildly derisive. Nobody expects a Christmas.

If we expect anything this dark season it is of long nights, cold weather, and all the half-baked sentimentality of a Pottery Barn or a Starbucks Christmas. And so, like Jews living in America we join the frivolity of the season because, frankly, it is more fun that dwelling on the dead end these days represent.³ And if we spend too much, work a little too hard at it, get distracted in this season by the ceremony of Winter solstice, please look a little under the surface. It is not because we are secular or shallow. It is because we are desperate for the distraction of hope in a world that seems not very hopeful. Could you please turn up the Bing Crosby, please?

In 1978 when my family moved from Minnesota to Fort Collins, I asked my father if I could take his camera along. There was an angle of extortion in my asking. That borrowed 35 mm Minolta Hi-Matic rangefinder was the only way my parents were going to be able to receive photographs of their growing grandchildren. My father agreed, and for the next several years a steady stream of pictures of those grinning grandchildren made their way by mail back to the Midwest.

Years later upon returning from a family vacation in the mountains, I realized that I could not put my hands on the camera. One day, two days, three days back home. It was not turning up. I wracked my brain for clues to where I might have put it. Then it dawned on me with a sickening realization that when we were at the top of Independence Pass, just after we had taken the obligatory family portrait, I had put the camera down for a moment . . . on the rear bumper of my car.

The only thing worse than carelessly losing a prized possession would be to lose the possession of another, like a parent’s. Entrusted, I had failed. I don’t know the grandparents noticed but in the weeks and months that followed, that stream of photographs dried up. When my parents were out for a visit early that Fall, I finally screwed up my courage and asked my father if I could speak with him in the back yard. There we were, the two of us, sitting in the shade of a tree, on lawn chairs, with ice teas in our hands. He could tell by my demeanor that something important was coming down.

After I could delay no longer I told him. “I lost your camera, Dad. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” he exclaimed, “I thought this was about something *important!*” He let me off the hook, by reassuring me that cameras could always be replaced, though of course he never did. His response, though, did nothing to cut through my own disappointment in myself. We have

³ This Jewish practice is outlined in Barry D. Cytron, “Observing Christmas: A Jewish Perspective,” *Word and World*, Volume 27, Number 4 (Fall, 2007), 414-20.

adjusted and accommodated ourselves to life as it actually is lived, our losses and our gains all mixed together. We have become used to our disappointments. Over the years, I slowly integrated this loss into my life-story. Like many disappointments in life, gradually I came not to think about that which I could not change. For over twenty years now, I haven't thought about it much.

A recent article describing married love in people of age notes something called the "familiarity effect, which keeps people from leaving a longtime relationship even though he nags and she won't ask for directions."⁴

"As people get older," a researcher at M.I.T. says, people are more "willing to accept things that when we're young we would find disturbing and vexing."⁵ What we find most disturbing can be accommodated more easily as we age. In the camera matter, maybe that explains the difference between my father's and my reaction. As we get older we seem to be able to accommodate better to disappointment and loss. It's usually called maturity.

Maturity works against us in Advent. In maturity we rely on our own devices and don't notice the skulking thief. More than that, no one expects that at this late date in our world that the surprise will be good.

Last winter I finished an interment at Fort Logan and on the way back to church I stopped into a favorite camera shop in Littleton, just to browse for a few minutes. I was looking through a pile of used camera equipment when I glimpsed it. There was the Minolta Hi-matic. My heart raced. Of course, I cannot be sure it was my father's very camera, but for the purposes of my joyful surprise and for this sermon, I think we can surmise that it indeed was. I could barely get my wallet out quick enough to make it my own. I can remember very few surprises in my life that were as unexpected.

Advent is the celebration of desire⁶ reconsidered. Having accommodated so maturely, you and I will need to get acquainted again with our own rekindled desire of reconciliation with God, restoration of hope, and expectations of peace. But it is also at root the celebration of God's desire. It is God's desire to love and win back this flawed and finite creation. Mary Hinkle writes,

Maybe the surprise, when Christ returns, will be that he was here all along.
Maybe the surprise will be that, ahead of time himself, he has been calling,
gathering, enlightening and sanctifying the meek and all the rest of those who
bear his name.⁷

⁴ Kate Zernike, "Still Many-Splendored: Love in the Time of Dementia," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007.

⁵ John Gabrielli, "Still Many-Splendored."

⁶ Janet Schlichting, "Advent-Christmas: The Education of Desire," *Word and World*, Volume 27, Number 4 (Fall, 2007), 394.

⁷ Hinkle, *op.cit.*

Advent is the good news that some of our maturity is misplaced. For if it is really true that God has not given up on us, then surely we must be as ready as we can be, which won't of course, be adequate. For surely he comes. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.