

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple on Sunday, November 28, 2010.

(Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13: 11-14; Matthew 24: 36-44)

There has been a spate of break-ins in my neighborhood over the last several weeks. Not home break-ins, but car break-ins. Really I guess you would call these smash-and-grab operations. The culprit smashes the car window and grabs up any electronic device that's easily accessible. GPS systems seem to be quite a hot item this holiday season, and I do mean hot. As my family drove down our street Thanksgiving day on the way to Aunt Joan and Uncle Jim's house of good cooking, we saw yet another smashed car window. A cement block, broken glass and some other debris littered the road. It looked as if no one had yet discovered the deed. We pulled over and my husband, John, knocked on the door of the neighbor. A very groggy young man came to the door in his pajamas. He came out, surveyed the damage. The two men talked briefly, sadly shaking their heads. When John got back in the car, he reported that the car break-in was not the worst of it. The young man and his wife had been up late into the night caring for their dying cat. It was just adding insult to heartbreaking injury.

These break-ins are annoying. They're more than that. They're infuriating. I remarked to my family as we drove away that we should form a little neighborhood night patrol and see if we could catch those rascals in the act. Well, sure enough, I was not the only one who had such a thought. We subscribe to a neighborhood Listserv and others proposed some similar kind of an idea. But before you could say "incoming," our inboxes lit up with increasingly incendiary charges, "You're talking about vigilantism. You're nothing but a bunch of elitists." The merits of community watch versus the merits of private security companies heatedly debated. Yikes! Apparently trying to cast out the works of darkness, as our collect says this morning, without casting judgment upon thy neighbor is harder than one might think.

In the collect for this first Sunday in Advent, we implore Almighty God to "give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in this time of this mortal life." I love the sound of that. I want God to give me this power to cast away the works of darkness. I want to know where to find this armor of light and use it like a flashlight to cast a little illumination on those dark places and those evildoers. Trouble is, Saint Paul sent words which are not addressed to those "other guys." The collect and the words from Saint Paul in the reading to Romans, those injunctions to "lay aside the works of darkness, to live honorably as in the day, not reveling in drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy," those words aren't addressed to the "other guy." They're addressed to me. They're addressed to you. They are addressed to the members of the body of Christ who have become careless and distracted rather than eagerly anticipating the second coming of Christ. Paul is concerned that if the followers of Christ fail to live as if he might return at any moment, then we might also fail to expect his return. And we might fail to live up to the expectations of living a moral life in this mortal life.

Combating the works of darkness begins and maybe even ends in confronting the sin in our own life. "Give us grace," the collect says. Meaning we cannot cast out sin, but must ask God's help.

And there is some urgency in getting our affairs, our moral affairs, in order as Saint Paul writes, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers, the night is far gone, the day is near." Whoa! Episcopalians, we don't generally go in for a heavy emphasis upon end of time speculation. No greater authority than Jesus says, "But about that day and hour, no one knows." It's rather interesting to go back and read about the number of times someone has predicted the end of the world on such and such a date. I want to know, what happens to those guys the day after Jesus doesn't come back. Still, I think we do ourselves, our smarter-than-thou selves, a disservice if we dismiss talk of the second coming entirely.

In the Gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus reminds his listeners of the time just before the great flood wiped out all life on earth save for Noah and those with him on the ark. Everyone was going about their ordinary lives eating, drinking, marrying, working. "They knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man." Jesus' point is just because I don't know when or where or how my life will be ended doesn't mean it won't come to some kind of an end. Maybe just the end of my life or your life, maybe the end of all mortal life. The point is, there will be an end and there will be a day of reckoning. There's nothing wrong with eating, drinking, marrying, working. They did most of those things on the ark and after they got off. But those swept away by the flood had not prepared themselves a vessel. They had not prepared themselves in something that could carry them through the inevitable trials of life which will sweep over all of us at some point or another. Jesus is warning his disciples to build up a structure of life, a community of character that will carry us through all danger. Part of being ready for whatever floods our life or our world with danger is to build a vessel. Let's call it a church that can carry us through.

Advent is the time we are preparing for all kinds of break-ins. Yes, the breaks-ins and break downs that come as a result of human sin, especially our own failures. But more importantly, Advent reminds us to prepare for sometimes alarming but always exhilarating ways that God is ready to break in to our lives. We remember in Advent all the times in the past that God has broken in the world, to show us a way to start over, to show us a way to back up from war and work towards peace, a way to beat our swords of hostility into plowshares of community lived in love and charity with our neighbors. We remember how God broke into the domination system of Pharaoh and led his people to freedom. In Advent we remember how God broke into the life of a peasant girl living in Judea, we look back to Bethlehem where God broke into human flesh. And in Advent we also look ahead in anticipation of the ways that God will break in again in the course of human history. We can't know the time, we can't know the place, we just know it will happen and we need not be afraid. Just prepared.

Two nights ago, Friday evening, hundreds and hundreds of residents of Portland, Oregon gathered in front of their courthouse for a Christmas tree lighting ceremony. What they didn't find out until later that night was that one of their fellow residents, a teenager born in Somalia, naturalized as an American citizen, had planned and hoped to detonate a truckload of explosives at the edge of the square. While the FBI foiled this plot to turn an evening of celebration into a nightmare of destruction, it is nonetheless chilling to realize that we never know when such works of darkness, small or large, will find their ways into our lives. We never know when some kind of harm or danger will break into the apparent tranquility of our lives.

Petty crime against property irritates us. Crime against another human being enrages us. Unthinkable crimes against humanity have become completely thinkable and seemingly diabolical. And our worry over how to predict, prevent and protect ourselves from such works of darkness become a consuming occupation. All kinds of energy and resources are exerted at airports and home alarm systems and neighborhood watches. I don't condemn any of these precautions. I take plenty of them myself. But Advent reminds us that we need to be concerned with more than just watching out for bad actors pursuing nefarious activities. Advent suggests that we need to be alert and watching how God is ready to break in to our hearts and lives today.

At a time of year when the world turns darker and colder, at least in the northern hemisphere, Christians begin a slow but determined process of turning up the lights and sharing the warmth of God's love. Each Sunday in Advent we will light more candles. In Christmas we will light more candles and by the end of the Christmas season, our church will be ablaze in a Feast of Lights. We have to put away the works of darkness because we have so much other good work to do. We have soups to make for the homebound. We have Christmas trees to buy from the women and men of TROSA who are striving to cast out works of darkness in their lives that go along with the horrible powers of drug addiction. We have alternative gifts to buy from Housing for New Hope, Habitat for Humanity, Holy Cross Anglican School and a host of other equally wonderful compelling communities of character. Tell your friends about the variety of December doorbusters available at St. Luke's. What a great time to bring a friend to church.

Today is the church's New Year's Day. We start again. In an oddly faithful and courageous way, we step out into the darkness. Not to search out and destroy, but to watch and welcome God and welcome the light of Christ back into our lives. Advent is a time to say we are not afraid of the world's darkness. We neither accept it nor run from it. We confront it because God is with us even now. Not just in the past, not just in the future, but now. Amen.