First Sunday of Advent, Cycle A

It is probably not a great revelation to you

That security is big business in the United States

According to the *Installation Business Report* , for example

in 2011 the domestic electronic security industry alone

generated almost 35 billion dollars in revenue

and the domestic security industry doesn’t hold a candle

to the commercial market

you know that since every time you walk into a store,

restaurant, bank or bar

there are all those cameras in the ceiling

reminding you that you are always being monitored

It may sound like big brother, but can you blame them?

every year 13 billion is stolen from retailers

and that figure was from last year …

before the new sport of flash mob robbery appeared

throw on top of that the identity theft

with estimates of over 15 million victims each year

with losses some calculate to be over 50 billion dollars

And you can begin to understand

Why Jesus’ message from today’s gospel seems timely

Be on your guard

Protect yourself against the unexpected intruder

Be cautious of those on-line purchases

Be careful when you’re negotiating those holiday crowds

While on the one hand

It could seem that the gospel is not only giving us

A societal but a seasonal tip for being careful

And for shoring up our defenses

Against the pickpockets and identity thieves

Who physically or digitally threaten our financial solvency

The gospel is actually even more subversive than that

But should that really be surprising

In this subversive liturgical season we call advent?

Admittedly calling Advent a subversive season

May seem odd or inappropriate

Especially since many Christians think of Advent

As the beginning of the church year

the season before Christmas

And the 4 week period we use

For preparing for the birth of Christ.

But that’s where Advent becomes at least paradoxical

If not subversive and even contradictory

think about the music we sing during this season

one of the most traditional, an Advent staple is

“O come, come Emmanuel”

Lovely music, but didn’t Emmanuel already come?

Wasn’t Jesus born 2000 plus years ago

Isn’t the birth of Christ a long past historical event?

If so, how can this or any season

Prepare us for something that’s long past?

Isn’t that’s akin to preparing for the Punic wars

Or gearing up for the election of JFK

Or planning a party around wedding of Charles & Diana?

The subversive nature of this season, however

Is clearly hinted at in the readings

Not just of this Sunday but the next 3 Sundays

In which there is not a single hint of birthing babies

Or angelic messengers

Or pregnant teens and doting fiancés

None of that appears until the 4th Sunday of advent

Just 3 days before Christmas

Instead of stories of Gabriel, or Mary’s visitation to Elizabeth

Or Joseph’s dreams to marry his already pregnant betrothed

We have prophecies about the end of violence and war

Paul’s admonition to shrug off the stupor of indifference

And a Gospel in which we are warned to be on our guard

Not only against some evil force

Some evil predator

But actually to be on our guard against a surprise attack

From none other than the very holy one of God

For in that gospel from Matthew

Jesus is not warning us

about some celebrated cat burglar

but the in-breaking of the very reign of God

a divine assault that many in his day

so many in our own

have difficulty recognizing.

Ok … I know it sounds “odd” … and so out of sync

With traditional ways of thinking about God

Or Jesus, or advent

That when someone asks you what the sermon was about today

You might report about some crazy Franciscan

Spouting some heresy about God being a thief!

But before you write off the crazy Franciscan or interpretation

Consider that the Church has opened this first Sunday of Advent

With a reading from Isaiah

in that reading this great vision of a peaceable kingdom

presented as the kingdom of the god of Jacob

Isaiah could have used one of many other titles of god here

The god of Abraham, or Isaac, or Moses

But he did not

Instead he conjures of image of shalom and peace

By recalling the patriarch whose own life

Was the very antithesis of shalom

Jacob is the guy who picked a fight in the womb

With his twin brother Esau

Who used his sibling rivalry to claim the birthright

of his older brother

and through a series of deceptions

tricks his father into bestowing upon him

the blessing due to his older brother

and if you don’t believe me look it up

it’s all in Genesis, chapter 27

When he goes out on his own

His most intimate experience of God

Was a knock down drag out wrestling match

There was conflict in his marriages

And between his wives and their handmaids

Through whom he had 12 sons

And, maybe like father like son,

11 of his sons take it upon themselves

To beat their younger brother Joseph

The father’s favorite

Throw him down a hole and sell him as a slave

To a bunch of foreigners

In summarizing, one commentator suggests

That Jacob and his family but the word fun

Back in dysfunctional

And Jacob could appear to be the post-child for conflict

And there’s the point,

If God can raise up a holy nation

from the squabbling family of Jacob

then this God can pull virtually any rabbit out of any hat

and bring peace even in the most violent of times

Undoubtedly the greatest divine magic trick

Performed by this God of Jacob .. this God of Jokesters

was not to find an even more conflicted person as Jacob

To redeem all of humankind

But for God to assume human nature itself

For God to take on the very form of conflicted humanness

For God to actually become one of the very creatures

so need of redemption and salvation

And to inhabit the fullness of humanity

It all of its weakness and fragility

Even unto death.

This was an idea so outlandish

So divinely ridiculous

So supernaturally laughable …

That many if not most people in his own time

Did not believe that Jesus could possibly be a messenger of God

Much less God in human guise

So they rejected him, they mocked him, they shunned him

And in the face of such closed minds and closed hearts

Jesus is increasingly self-aware that

he is a burglar, he is a mugger

He is a bandit, he is a thief …

Who mugs the spiritually smug

Who robs the self-righteous of righteousness

Who assaults the pious true piety

And short circuits the security systems of every one

Who believes they have a lock on salvation.

The season of advent is not simply some prelude

To the next birthday part of the baby Jesus

But in the spirit of the great spiritual master the Dali Lama

Maybe fundamentally a season of mindfulness

Of paying attention to the now

Of being aware of the moment.

A parishioner of OSP related that a couple of years ago

She was taking a tour in Thailand

And had developed something of a rapport

With the Buddhist tour guide

At one point in the conversation, the Buddhist asked

“who is the most important person in your life”

My friend’s mind start to race

Thinking of family members and friends

Colleagues and co workers

But before she could get an answer out

The Buddhist said,

The most important person in your life

Is the one standing in front of you now.

Bam - advent - stay awake

Be alert - Be on your guard

Attend to the person standing in front of you

And if that is the summons of advent

Maybe our most Buddhist of seasons

Who does that summons become even more pointed

When refracted through the basic mystery

Revealed in the Christmas season

The mystery of incarnation

A mystery that announces not only that Jesus was born

But in taking on human form

This holy thief has robbed all of humanity of its facelessness

All of humanity of its autonomy

All of humanity of its erasability

And instead affirms that every human being

Is the living, breathing image of God

And that the gift of incarnation

Particularly for those baptized into the body of Christ

Is the missional commitment

To enact the mystery of incarnation

To be accomplices with the divine burglar

And be Christ’s body to this broken world

And to erased humanity.

That too often has been overlooked, unloved,

Unmourned

And so the poet sadly mused

The man I did not notice yesterday died today and left me alone.

A few years ago a parishioner at OSP sent me an e-mail; in it he retold a recent experience he had on the elevator on the 8th floor of Macy's at Water Tower. It was two days before Christmas, the crowds were almost overwhelming.  He was the last to squeeze into the elevator packed with people and bags.  Among others, there was a woman and her son on the elevator.  The son was around 14, and in a wheel chair.  He wrote “I think she had some trouble maneuvering herself & her son into the elevator while shoppers were more focused on their lists than they were on helping, or even seeing, anyone else in their path.   After the elevator doors shut, it was quiet for a moment.  Until the mom broke the silence in the elevator and in a weak voice said "Merry Christmas everyone."  I think everyone responded with a reasonable, but not necessarily energetic, "Merry Christmas to you too."  With a stronger voice, she then said, "This is my son.  He just got a new heart.  Today is our first day out of the hospital, and he wanted to be near a lot of people."  As she finished her sentence, the elevator doors opened onto the floor they had chosen.  Everyone on the elevator "woke up" and eagerly offering words of congratulations and holiday cheer. The mother & son left the elevator.  The doors shut.  And those of us on the elevator looked at each other - no longer strangers - at least for a moment.

A mother and her son

But not a newborn from Bethlehem

And a virgin mother

But a fresh incarnation

Through a heart reborn … suddenly transplanted into the hearts

Of unsuspecting shoppers.

And so with the poet we pray

*O Holy Theif: Attack*

*When the sun has turned the lake to flame*

*And the waves are music on the beach.*

*Ambush me*

*In the quiet beyond words I have with her.*

*Spring at me from the running boy.*

*Vanquish me in the courage of the weak.*

*O Blessed Burglar,*

*take me by surprise*

*In the wrinkled smile*

*Of the old lady with the floppy hat.*

*Shock me with your lurking presence*

*In the street vendor*

*The bartender*

*And the mail carrier*

*But be warned I will be on my guard Welcoming defeat*

*At your holy hands.*

In this season of joyous mindfulness

And blessed insecurity

We await such salvific defeat at your holy hands as well,

For you are the Christ, eternally reborn in your church and in the world

Lord and God, forever and ever.