

Christ Church + Washington Parish

Advent 1 Sunday

The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli

December 1, 2013, Year A, Matthew 24:36-44

Last Advent I made a terrible mistake. For the previous four weeks in our living room, our sons had a fort made out of cardboard. It was fairly big as cardboard forts go; there were several boxes held together by duct tape. It had a chimney. The walls were decorated with multi-color scribbles. And it looked like any living room fort looks after four weeks of play – dilapidated.

It took up a whole corner of the living room, and Thanksgiving was over, so it is time to decorate. I sit my then four year old down and explain the problem. The Christmas tree can only go there where the fort is; we need to remove the fort. “We’ll save it in the basement,” I promise. “but we need to put it away for six weeks so we can have the place decorated for Christmas.” After being convinced that the fort could not go under the tree, my son agrees, and my husband and I take the fort to the basement and set-up the tree. Each night of December we read our bedtime stories under the tree. With the lights and ornaments of the tree and the fire in the fireplace and two little boys in footie pajamas, the living room becomes sacred space for me during the nights of Advent.

Six weeks later it is time to put away Christmas decorations. Now keep in mind neither son has mentioned the fort since its removal. My husband and I box away Christmas, and then look at the cardboard fort. See, in taking it down the narrow stairway of the basement, the fort had suffered some additional damage. It no longer held its shape. It looked like a bunch of pieces of flat cardboard, colored on, and held together by duct tape. I turn to my husband, "Do you think they would notice if we just threw it away?" "Nahh."

Three days later, we are walking to school and my son asks, "when is the fort coming up from the basement?"

"what fort?"

"Mommmmm, the fort you took down to make room for the Christmas tree."

"Well, honey, that fort was too broken to bring back up."

"Mommm, no it's not, I'll go down and get it."

"Honey, it's gone . . . we threw it out."

My friends, you would have thought I had thrown out all his Christmas presents. The kid was balling. I tried to make it better - we can make another fort, a bigger, nicer fort, one that's not colored on, one that stands up. "No, I loved that fort," in between tears. I delivered him to his teacher his face stained with tears. At bedtime he continued to cry about the lost fort. The next day too. And the next. We never made another fort. He never wanted to; the one he loved was gone. That corner of our living room remains fortless.

Advent is about making room for God in our lives. It's about intentional preparation for the coming of Christ. It is about the alertness that comes with anticipation. I'm on board with this; it's why I have six boxes of Christmas decorations – to change the external space of my life to remind myself to make room for the sacred breaking in of God into our world in the Incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas. But I wasn't paying attention to this reading. This first Advent reading from Matthew. God comes into our ordinary lives, amidst what is already going on. In my attempt to create sacred space for God to come in, I missed the sacred space that was already present.

Looking at these three examples from Matthew breaking in, you couldn't get more ordinary. At the time of Noah, people are eating and drinking; they are celebrating people's marriages. Then, the next, two are working in the field, and finally, two women are grinding meal. No one is doing anything bad. They are the ordinary tasks of normal living – eating, drinking, marrying, working, cooking. Then, God breaks in – in a powerful, life-changing way. There are some who are ready for that and some who are not. Yet their readiness has little to do with what they are doing, where they are, and who they are with.

“Are you ready for Christmas?” will be a frequent question over the next month. It is likely referring to gift-giving lists, travel plans, and guest preparations. “Are you ready for Christmas?” in the spiritual sense is a different question; Are you ready for the incarnation? Are you ready for God coming into your life? Sure, I’m ready if God chooses to break in in the way that I want it to happen – this person be healed, this person stop treating me like crap, this job possibility work out. Sure, I’m ready for God to appear in my life if it’s in a way that makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside rather than challenged and disrupted. Sure, I’m ready for God to appear in my living room with a roaring fire, a Christmas tree, and dozens of twinkling lights, but not in a dilapidated cardboard box. Not on a cross at Calvary. Not in a manger filled with hay surrounded by mooing cows, baaing sheep, and a crowd of strange shepherds. But God doesn’t say he’s coming in the way we want. God doesn’t say he’s coming in a way we expect. God just says he’s coming. Advent makes innkeepers out of us all, asking us to find a place in our ordinary lives for the extraordinary God who will show at any time, in any place, in any way and can find a home even in a manger in the backyard of our lives. But we won’t know God’s there if we don’t take the time to go look and pay attention, maybe even move God out of the backyard into the center of our homes and hearts.

I love Advent – I’ve got four different Advent calendars at home right now. I like the attentiveness with which we live, counting each day. I love the generosity celebrated by our culture, as we adopt families to give gifts to or figure out how to purchase the right gift for our loved ones. I love the anticipation of Christmas in our worship service as we sing O come, O come, Emmanuel at the beginning of the service each Sunday, and move the characters of the nativity scene closer and closer to the stable. But in these seasonal traditions, I sometimes lose sight of what Advent is all about - God breaking into the ordinary of our lives. When everything around us is so extra-ordinary, it perhaps distracts us from the God coming in the very ordinary. Like in regular meals shared, simple compassion showed, and, of course, in sacred forts of joy in our living rooms.

This passage from Matthew, and every gospel passage on the first Sunday of Advent is oriented to a future breaking in of God, to Christ coming again. The celebration of Christmas points to a past breaking in of God in Jesus first coming into the world, and we celebrate them both to make us more attentive to the present breaking in of God in our own lives. As we begin this season of Advent, may we discover the places in our life that God has already entered and made sacred. May we be ready for the future coming of Christ by paying attention to the ways that he is already here.