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**“The Antithetical Thief”  
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**

**First Sunday of Advent  
November 28, 2010**

**Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36–44**

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It's interesting that in my bible's concordance,  
the very next words that follow the words thank, thankful, thankfulness,  
thanks, and thanksgiving are theft, thefts and thieves.  
A season of thievery, it seems,  
follows closely on the heels of a season of thanksgiving.  
And actually, today we'll celebrate both, as we step into Advent  
and prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus,  
the antithetical thief, who has broken into human hearts and human  
history  
to steal away our sin;  
and we'll celebrate Eucharistia, or Great Thanksgiving for God's in-breaking grace,  
at the Table of the Lord.

The term “thief”, odd as it might seem, does appear quite frequently in Scripture,  
as it refers to a human proclivity,  
perhaps older than even the oldest human profession.

In the Old Testament, it's not surprising that its meaning is quite literal.

For example, theft is strictly verboten in the eighth commandment:

“Thou shalt not steal” (Exodus 20: 15), followed by subsequent laws

of the Mosaic covenant concerning theft and the punishment thereof:

“If a person steals an ox or a sheep,

that person must pay back five head of cattle for the ox, and four for the sheep;  
a thief must certainly make restitution, but if having nothing, he or she must be sold  
to pay for the theft;

if a person gives his neighbor silver or goods for safekeeping

and they are stolen from the neighbor's house, the thief, if caught,  
must pay back double.” (Exodus 22: 1-7)

The wisdom literature of Proverbs 6:30 nuances thievery somewhat when it  
occurs from necessity, saying “people do not despise a thief  
if he or she steals to satisfy hunger, when starving.

Yet if caught, he or she must pay sevenfold, though it costs all the wealth of one's  
house.”

Restitution is in full, regardless of the motive, the writer of Proverbs notes.

But when we get to the New Testament,

theft and thievery can carry either literal or metaphorical connotations.

Literally, admonishments against theft abound in the moral code of faith,

where they tend to fall close in proximity to sexual immorality  
as behavior unbecoming to a Christian.

And then, metaphorically, there are the allusions to Jesus in Matthew and Luke,

who will come unexpectedly during some watch of the night like a thief  
(Matthew 24: 43; Luke 12:39);

or the third beatitude in Revelation which says, “Behold, I come like a thief!

Blessed are they who stay awake and keep their clothes with them,

so they may not go naked and be shamefully exposed” (Rev. 16: 15).

In other words, you don't want to be caught naked on the Day of the Lord!

And I wonder, why should we begin Advent, our liturgical new year,

with conversations about the Second Coming of Jesus;

and why would Jesus himself speak of his second coming

using the metaphorical imagery of "theft" to refer to his return?  
Perhaps it has something to do with the visceral response they both elicit from us:  
because thoughts of the Second Coming, or Parousia,  
and thoughts of domestic invasion  
make us extremely uneasy, wary and watchful,  
because they both remind us of  
our vulnerability and potential powerlessness as human beings.

Do you know what I mean?

Have you ever been the victim of a breaking and entering?

Our house was broken into about this time two years ago,  
and I'll never forget the turmoil and upheaval,  
physically and emotionally, which that event created for my family.  
In our case, the thief came not during a watch of the night,  
but in bold daylight, immediately after Hedge, Stuart and I locked the doors  
and went our separate ways:

Hedge, up the street to his church to work;

and Stuart and I across town for his doctor's appointment.

It was January, one of the coldest days of 2009,  
with the high that day hovering around 20 degrees.

Our Christmas tree was still up in the living room, still lit and decorated.

And our faithful little green watch-bird, Kiwi, was stationed at her usual spot  
by the dining room window, where she enjoys squawking as we come and go,  
and tracking the wild fauna which traipse through our yard regularly.

But on this day, when Hedge returned home around 3:00 in the afternoon,

he found our poor little tropical bird out in the driveway,  
in the freezing cold, all puffed up and looking quite traumatized.

So he called the police, and called me to come home, and sure enough

when we entered by the front door with the police escort,  
we found our back French doors shattered, our house ransacked,

our Christmas tree, still lit, yet sadly toppled, spilling baubles everywhere,  
and thousands of shards of glass twinkling like diamonds all over  
the floor and furniture.

And my stomach turned, and my adrenaline ran, and my disgust level rose,  
not so much that a stranger could take anything of great value to me,  
but that someone uninvited had touched my personal belongings,  
had walked my personal pathways,  
had endangered my sweet, innocent pet,  
had given my children cause to worry,  
and had spilled, overturned and rearranged my whole life in an instant.

We asked our next door neighbor, who is home all the time taking care of his elderly  
mother,

if he had noticed anything strange going on around our house that day,  
and we warned him to keep his eyes open,  
should similar thefts occur elsewhere.

And the response of this usually docile man shocked us, as if we weren't already in  
shock.

He said, "I tend to shoot first, ask questions later."

All of us, it seems, were just not quite ourselves as a result of this break-in.

All of our hackles were up. We felt anxious. We felt insecure. We felt vulnerable.

We felt afraid. We felt overly-concerned with "our things". And we felt isolated.

And although each of you might not have experienced a home invasion, per se,

each of us knows how it feels to have something valuable stolen:

whether it is the innocence of a child, stolen by a stranger;

or health, stolen by a random virus;

or fiscal security, stolen by the downturn of the economy;

or a life, stolen by a miscarriage of nature or justice;

or trust, stolen by the misplaced affections of another;

or mental well-being, stolen by brain disease or by Alzheimers;

our a love, stolen by sudden and unexpected death.

Could we have seen any of these coming? Could they have been averted?

Don't they all strip us of our purported sense of power and control?

Don't they all expose us at our most vulnerable point?

This is key, I think, to Jesus' metaphorical language concerning his return:

that he, this thief like no other,

will meet us at the point of our greatest weakness;

that he, this antithetical thief, will break in to lives and places where other supports

of power and control have broken down.

So be ready, keep watch, be ready, keep watch, men and women.

The spring tide of God's grace could turn and rise at any time.

God's beloved thief could take us all by surprise, to give where others have taken.

Matthew's Gospel, just to give you some background, speaks primarily to

Jewish Christians, and thus presents Jesus as the new Moses,

as a figure bringing a new kind of law and order to the world.

Just as the old law was delivered to God's chosen people in the five books of the Torah,

the new law of Jesus, according to Matthew,

is delivered to the new God-family in five sections,

our passage today coming from Matthew's fifth discourse, which deals

with eschatological matters and judgment.

And just as God once broke into the high and mighty power structures

of Egyptian culture via a little marginalized baby in a rush basket

when Pharaoh was on a violent rampage to retain power and control,

God now breaks into the power structures of the Roman empire,

when King Herod is on a similar bloody and violent power grab,

by placing another at-risk baby in a stable trough to

make peace by showing the world another kind of power and rule:

the power of vulnerable love and the rule of servanthood.  
And when Jesus comes again, he will come unexpectedly once more,  
like a flood, of all things, but NOT like a flood that destroys,  
and like a thief, of all things, but NOT like a thief who makes us poor.

*The New York Times* this last week had a fascinating article called,  
"This is your Brain on Metaphors", written by a professor of Biology, Neurology,  
and Neurosurgery at Stanford University. .

(Robert Sapolsky. *The New York Times*. "This Is Your Brain on Mepahors. 11/16/2010)

It talked about the structure of our human brain, and how it has evolved  
into an organ of millions of neurons, making it capable of complex  
fine motor skills and of highly-developed language.

The human frontal cortex, the article says, is proportionately bigger and denser in its  
wiring

than that of all other mammals, making us more capable than other mammals  
of emotional regulation, delaying gratification, executive decision-making,  
and long-term planning.

It also allows our brains to feel pleasure triggered by unlikely juxtapositions,  
like symbols, metaphors, analogies, parables, and figures of speech;  
like bread and cup intertwined with body and blood, the author notes;  
like Jesus referring to his second coming as another kind of flood,  
or a night-time breaking and entering, I would add.

The literal aspects of language trigger neurons in the area of our brain  
called the insula,

which elicit our heart-felt reactions, our visceral reactions to something  
like flood or theft, our fight or flight kind of thinking.

While the metaphorical aspects of language trigger neurons in our frontal cortex  
which allow us to analyze, and to ask questions like,

how is Jesus' coming like a rising tide or a robbery,  
but how is it not like that at all?

All the while, our brain is linking and confusing the two, building inner cranial bridges  
in pleasant and mystifying ways, the article's author Robert Sapolsky says.

But I find his next idea even more fascinating. Listen to this:

that this co-mingling of literal and metaphorical imagery also can allow  
for external bridges of hope and peace to be built in our lives and in our  
world.

He cites as one example, peace talks in the Middle East,

which continue to stall, as we known, around the conference-room table  
and frontal cortex issues of rights about water, placement of borders, trade agreements,  
and extent of militarization.

But droplets of peace, Sapolsky notes, tend to seep through

in "mutual symbolic concessions" of no material benefit to either side,  
like the time when Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak

and Jordan's King Hussein attended the funeral of the murdered  
Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.

And I think Jesus would say, that was where God's flood of grace rose to new levels,  
and where the antithetical thief came in the night to mysteriously  
begin to bind up the broken-hearted.

Sapolsky further cites the case from Northern Ireland, where leadership failed  
to negotiate peace when the ex-Unionist extremists and I.R.A. radicals  
served in the government together,

but instead, they surprisingly forged a common bond when those officials  
publicly commiserated about each others' family misfortunes,  
or exchanged anniversary gifts with one another.

And I think Jesus would say, that's when God's flood of grace re-silted the desolate  
delta,

and when the antithetical thief came in the night to secure the hearts of  
those who felt insecure because of strife.

And lastly, Sapolsky reminds us of the South Africans, who failed to establish real  
rapport

across racial and economic lines  
through successful negotiations about land reapportionment,  
but instead who came together when black South Africans embraced rugby  
and white Afrikaans rugby players sang the A.N.C. national anthem.  
And I think Jesus would say, that's when God's flood of grace  
exalted valleys and leveled mountains,  
and when the antithetical thief came in the night  
to beat war chants into rugby cheers, and spears into vu-vu zelas.

I am reminded in these instances of another story, the incident known as  
Christmas Truce of World War I,  
that occurred along the Western Front in what is now Belgium in 1914.  
Although no official truce was announced by either side, as Christmas neared,  
the Germans began placing candles along their trench lines and in evergreen  
trees  
during odd watches of the night,  
and singing Christmas carols across the darkness,  
to which the British responded by singing their own Christmas carols.  
Then the two sides continued by shouting Christmas greetings to each other,  
and eventually by making excursions across "no man's land" to exchange  
small tokens, such as food, tobacco and souvenirs.  
And the artillery of both sides fell silent at night, at least for one night.

So I'm prone to wonder, if Christ's second coming  
might NOT be a one-time breaking and entering  
that will give back what has been taken,  
that will bind up what has been broken,  
make rich what has been impoverished,  
settle what has been unsettled,  
secure what has been insecure,

heal what has been harmed,  
give life to life that has been lost.  
But instead, maybe Jesus will come again like a tide of grace that rises inch by inch  
over many watches of many nights until the banks are breached.  
Or maybe Jesus, the antithetical thief, will steal into human lives one at a time,  
on this night and that,  
to give life and to give reverence for all life abundantly,  
in small ways that speak from the heart and to the heart, one heart to another,  
heart to heart, until a critical mass manages  
to make the artilleries of both sides fall silent.  
Maybe the second coming of the Messiah or the Day of the Lord,  
will be the culmination of many small acts of gentleness, tenderness, and  
kindness across lines of human differentiation;  
many mutual symbolic concessions which will eventually fill God's cup  
of grace to overflowing, to spillage, to flood.  
So be ready. Keep watch. Be ready. Keep watch, men and women, Jesus says.  
Because no one knows the day or the hour when, finally,  
the cup runneth over. Amen.