

First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2011 - Year B

A Game of Hide and Seek

Remember the old adage, “A watch pot never boils.” It seems everything about this time of year turns December (and Advent) into a “watched pot.” Society is propelling us toward Christmas with alarming speed. We receive a regular countdown of the number of shopping days until Christmas. Snarled traffic, Salvation Army bell ringers and music everywhere are just some of the constant reminders of the holidays ahead. And if this isn’t enough we spend countless hours watching and waiting for stores to open and items to go on sale. In the midst of all this, do we miss what we’re really supposed to be watching for?

This Sunday’s gospel includes the image of “gatekeeper”, one who keeps watch. Indeed, Jesus admonishes us to “Be watchful! Be alert!” He is addressing all of us for we are the gatekeepers.

In the first reading Isaiah describes what is happening in his time: the people have chosen their own ways, the way of sinning. But without God they are lost pulled in many directions with nothing satisfying them. And so they lament God’s absence and cry out that God would “rend the heavens and come down.”

To be a gatekeeper means we look at Isaiah’s world with all its longing, a world where God is hidden because of sinfulness. Today we await the fullness of Christ’s coming in a world still darkened by sinfulness. In spite of our being alert and watching this is the mystery we can so easily miss; in the midst of our own sinfulness. God comes, God is present!!

So how do we watch for Christ’s coming today? How do we make this Advent different? Let’s take the opportunity to look at Christ’s coming in a different way. Since God comes to us at Advent and Christmas in the form of a little child! Is it not logical, then, to think of God from the perspective of a child?

Here's what I mean. When we hear Mark saying "*the master of the house will come*" (*Mark 13:35*), we naturally think of the adult Christ, coming in glory and in judgment. But today let's think outside the Advent Box, if you will. Think of the master of the house as a playful child, already in your house, but hiding, hiding the way small children do when playing the game of hide and seek. So I propose that this Advent is a time to play games with the Christ-child! But I must warn you that this Child will play by his own rules!!

I remember when my son was much younger and one game we loved to play together was hide-and-seek. As usual I became the seeker in this game and Kyle relished the ability to hide from his father. So he hid himself (in the one and only hiding place he knew) and waited for me to find him. And he waited and waited and waited. Now you must remember for a child to wait even 5 minutes can be like eternity. So, he came out of his hiding place, only to find out I was nowhere to be seen. Why? Because I was trying to make it look like he had found the ideal hiding spot so I went so far as to go outside looking for him.

Instead, he assumed that I was not looking for him from the very beginning of the game, which made him cry. And crying, he ran to his mother complaining that dad was not looking for him.

Today, my friends in Christ, God says the same thing: "I hide, but no one wants to seek me."

So, if we want to avoid disappointing God, we have to ask: how do we find him? The best suggestion during Advent, and throughout the liturgical year, is simple: listen! If we are silent for awhile, with ourselves, with Scripture, with our prayer, then it is likely we will detect a giveaway sound that tells us where the child is hiding. It is tempting to rush off in search of the Child without first doing the listening. I know with my son all you had to do was listen and you would hear an occasional giggle that would give you a clue as to where to find him. And perhaps that is what we do for much of Advent – we rummage about, expecting to find him in our often overworked lives, in shopping malls, at parties. Yes, he can be found there, but it is more difficult; those are not his favorite hiding places.

If you listen deeply, you will likely hear a stirring of the Child in simpler places. One of the simplest places where he likes to hide is in the family gathered to share something exquisitely simple: human affection. Affection is a form of love that takes time to develop. We cannot expect to love everyone the way we love a spouse or a close family member but we can nurture affection. The family gathering may not always be ideal, but we can experience real affection, if we are watchful.

Where else might God, the master of the house be hiding? We know one characteristic of a child is playfulness. Look for him in the places where we are at play. Such places are hard to find at times, because play for us adults is hard. That is why we have to be mindful of God's ways during Advent. If we enter mindfully into the choosing of a meaningful gift, gathering with friends and family, we may very well find God at play there. But to experience the play of God, we have to be like a child and make up our own rules. Forget the conventional rules that compel us to seek out the most expensive gift, the hottest item on the market. Play by the rules that we know should apply: creative and simple expressions of caring. Be less mindful of the growing rivalry of Christmas decorations and more mindful of our neighbor's true self, which we may encounter if we are really listening. Most importantly, be more attentive to the real needs of the poor this Advent than to the apparent needs of those who are already quite well off. If we can adjust to rules such as these and are confident that they are God's rules, we will find the one we are seeking – the Christ.

And if you come to the end of Advent and still haven't found him, well think some more about the ways of children. Children like to sleep. Maybe, just maybe God is already with us but asleep. If so, how do we awaken him? One suggestion: as we begin to pray a new way using the New Roman Missal is to enter actively into Advent worship. Sing as loud and as well as we can! There is nothing that awakens this sleeping Child more than Catholics who enter into the liturgy with full hearts, minds and voices. Sing, sing joyfully from the depths of our hearts. And while we are singing, see if maybe, just perhaps we don't hear a tiny voice harmonizing with our own. That's will be the Christ child which we have awakened.

But, finally, if all this does not work, I have one further suggestion. Give up. Surrender! Say to God, "I cannot find you. You will have to find me." And here is the

paradox of Advent: while we are preparing to receive him, he is preparing to receive us. While we are seeking him, he is seeking us. While we are watching for him to return, he is watching to see if we will return to him. Return where you might ask? To our very hearts, of course, for that is where he has been all along. So, in the end, it is just a matter of saying as children do: The game is over! Here I am!

Be watchful, be alert, my friends in Christ for the master of the house is among us. So today and throughout Advent take the opportunity to do one thing every night before you go to bed, ask yourself, "Where have I found Christ today?" And every morning when you get up, pray, "Lord, show me yourself someday today." By being alert and being watchful, you'll be getting an extra gift; this one from God. You'll find Christ in your day. A truly, heavenly gift!!