LIVING BY FAITH, NOT BY FEAR

Sometimes the biblical imagery and the settings of the Old and New Testament seem very complicated and removed from daily experience in our contemporary world. They take us into cultures and customs that are so different from our own. As complex as today’s scriptures are, there is one experience in the gospel that many of us can relate to: the thief who breaks in to steal. Just today this notice was posted on the local “Nextdoor” website:

Hello Neighbors, I posted an urgent alert on Monday and have had no luck, so I am posting this again. Please watch the Ring videos below! On Saturday at 10 a.m. this young man came into my home. My whole family was home in our bedrooms! He rifled through our things for 10 minutes. He stole cash out of my purse and a few other items. This was in broad daylight with everyone home! Who knows what he will do next? I pray he doesn’t get a chance to do this to anyone else! If you have any information, please contact the Moraga Police. [Show of hands – how many of you have experienced a home or auto break in?]

After I left home in 1968 for the Oblate seminary, the Ohio neighborhood I grew up in changed dramatically — no longer an entirely ethnic Polish Catholic community. As my generation moved out, only the elderly were left behind, usually living alone — and that included my widowed mother. One evening, after going out with some relatives, she was dropped off in front of the house, unlocked the door and, once inside, flashed the porch lights on-and-off so my aunt and uncle would know that she was safely in the house. Little would they have suspected as they drove away that, as my mother walked into the living room, she heard the creaking of footsteps coming down the stairs. I can only imagine the fear that flashed through my mom’s mind and heart.

While it was a horribly scary encounter for my mom, fortunately, no harm came to her and it quickly became an amusing piece of our family folklore. My mother, not a person with much money, but also not a woman to mess with, brazenly created quite a stir as the thief tried to pull her wedding ring off her finger. “It’s hardly worth much,” she screamed, “and it’s one of the only tangible reminders of my deceased husband.” I don’t know if she threatened to use a paddle on him, or if the guy ran out the back door out of shame or fear, but she scared him away, and it sealed her reputation in our family as one tough woman.

In our gospel passage Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of God which he came to proclaim; it’s the story of a break-in. “If you knew when the thief was coming . . .” It’s a curious metaphor. Why would Jesus compare himself to a thief? For one thing, thieves rely on the element of surprise. They break in when we least expect it. Thieves don’t always look like
thieves. The well-dressed polite young man on a train to Naples years ago had his eye on my backpack. I could just tell. Successful thieves aren’t deterred by the barricades we install either: locked doors, security cameras, alarm systems. They know how to work around them or, worse yet, how to disarm them. So how does this image of a thief apply to Jesus? Two thousand years ago, Jesus broke into our world in a totally surprising way: as a simple carpenter-turned-itinerant-preacher, walking the dusty roads of a podunk place called Galilee. He came not employing force or violence but modeling tender service and forgiveness.

Even today Jesus is a master of disguises. He breaks into our lives in the guise of a fidgety baby or the lonely elderly neighbor, a victorious child at a swim meet, in a call for volunteers, in someone we’ve written off, in the face of an anxious refugee or sad news photo of a grieving mother who had lost her child to a heartless gunman. Jesus disarms the barricades we put up to keep him out: our compulsive busyness, our mindless routine, our endless clutter. Jesus the Thief is so good at what he does that he can break in anywhere and anytime. Thank God! And what does Jesus steal? Our hearts, yes. And—if we let him—our very identity. St. Paul declares: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.* So be alert to the coming of this divine thief.

At first glance today’s gospel passage may sound threatening, but look closely and you’ll see that the waiting and vigilance urged here is filled with hopeful longing and eager anticipation. There is no threatening tone. In fact, the very first line gives us the key to Jesus’ mind and heart: *Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom.* Jesus is in effect telling us: *Stop working for the Kingdom; you’ve already got it. Stop trying to achieve; it’s already yours.* Don’t try to work for gifts. If you do, they’re not gifts. The Lord has given you his kingdom already. Stop trying to get saved; you’re saved already. Insofar as you believe it each moment, insofar as you let it happen… you will experience it. That’s why it’s called “faith” — it’s the opposite of anxiety. It’s the belief that God is for us. If that’s true, then worry and anxiety are distractions. The person of faith has a serenity and a calm spirit about him or her. The little inconveniences of life don’t send her into a frenzy. Even a diagnosis of serious illness doesn’t turn him sour and despairing. That person understands what St. Catherine of Siena meant when she said: *All the way to heaven is heaven.*
The Letter to the Hebrews tries to pound that truth into our heads and hearts: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; By faith Abraham sojourned in the promised land; By faith he received power to generate a people as numerous as the stars of heaven. If we have the faith of Abraham, trusting that God is with us and for us, then Jesus’ gospel invitation isn’t so much of a challenge, but an wonderful invitation to set our hearts free: *Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*

So let’s take to heart the two invitations the gospel offers us today. The first is **vigilance**. People of faith, like the servants in the gospel, must always stand ready for the return of the Lord, for we really don’t know when he is coming.

The second invitation the gospel offers us today in living as people of faith is to have **focus** -- to keep our minds and hearts focused on God and the things of God: *Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*

In the road of life which we follow, there are many uncertainties and distractions, many ways to spend time or to waste time. We don’t know where the road will take us; we don’t know when it will end. But one thing is certain. At the end of the journey; our Lord will be there to meet us, to welcome us into the heavenly kingdom...IF we have prepared ourselves... IF we have used wisely this precious gift of time God has given us. That’s not a threat; it’s a promise – a promise we can count on because it comes from Our Lord himself.

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