

An old couple had dinner at another old couple's house. After eating, the wives left the table and went into the kitchen. The 2 gentlemen were talking, and one said, "Last night we went out to a new restaurant and it was really great. I highly recommend it."

The other man asked, "What's the name of the restaurant?" The man thought and thought and finally said, "What's the name of that flower you give to someone you love? You know the one that's red and has thorns." "Do you mean a rose?" "Yes, that's the one," he replied. He then turned toward the kitchen and yelled, "Rose, what's the name of that restaurant we went to last night?"

We find ourselves near the end of Matthew's gospel in today's reading. Jesus' ministry is ending, and He tells us to take heed. Be on guard. Stay awake. Watch. So much of the New Testament was written against a background of the delayed promised return of Christ. Christ had promised to return right away. The first Christians fully expected Him to do so. But He did not. The first generation of Christians gradually passed from the scene. Paul and Peter were martyred in Rome. Somebody must have said, "We better get some of this written down before everyone who was an eyewitness to the work and words of Jesus is dead." Thus the gospels were created. Probably Mark was first, then perhaps Matthew; then Luke and lastly, John. We can imagine how disillusioning it was for these early communities to see the eyewitnesses, the first disciples, gradually pass from the scene and leave the rest of us who came later. Luke clearly states that the purpose of his gospel, as well as the book of Acts, was to give the eyewitness a chance to record, in an orderly way, their first-hand experience with Jesus. It is against this background of delay that we get passages like today's gospel.

Sometimes the return of Jesus is spoken of as a grand, cosmic event in which the Anointed One descends on clouds from on high. The trumpets will sound, the dead shall be raised, and Christ will return.

But nestled within today's gospel is another image. Jesus says that the promised day of the Lord, that cataclysmic ending of the old world, and beginning of the new, will take place like "a thief in the night." He doesn't say that God is a thief, or that He is a thief. And yet He uses an evocative, perhaps even offensive, metaphor for describing how the kingdom of God steals in among us. It is like a thief. It is the nature of a burglar not to prepare those whom he is planning to burglarize. Surprise, unexpectedness, and shock typify burglaries.

Jesus comes among us like a thief? What a strange image. And yet we should use this image as a way of reflecting upon the way in which Christ comes among us.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent – a season when we celebrate the first historical coming of Christ at Bethlehem, and the second coming at the end of time. The Church has always said that Christ's promised coming will be very much like His other intrusions into our lives, His ongoing Advents among us.

Second, what does this mean? I think this unexpected and surprising final coming is fairly consistent with how God deals with us day in and day out. There was a time when I thought God mostly came to us when we were going through some tough time in our lives. When our defenses are down, emotions raw due to some difficult or tragic event that has occurred. When we are particularly open to the incursions of God. When we particularly need Him, He seems to come to us. I still believe that to be true.

But I have revised that thinking after priesting for 40 years. God often seems to come to us when we are not prepared. When we aren't looking for Him, aren't expecting Him, and maybe really didn't even feel that we needed Him. And yet God comes to us.

Perhaps this ought to tell us that the incursions of God among us are works of God, rather than based on our heightened awareness, our well-developed sensitivity, or even our need. God is free and sovereign, free to come and go as God pleases. Therefore intrusions among us are bound to seem surprising, unexpected.

Often the stories I hear are about people driving to work, or sitting at the breakfast table, or sitting quietly at home watching TV, or waking up in the morning, or moving through a crowded airline terminal. What a strange place for God to come – what strange timing!

And yet the very strangeness itself is a reminder: God's comings and goings among us are God's work – not ours.

It seems as though I've dealt with someone whose house had been burglarized in every parish I've served. I remember one woman in particular. She called and sobbed: "I've been robbed! Someone has stolen all of my family heirlooms! The silver! The china! All the things that my mother gave to me – all those memories – gone!" I went over to her house. I knew how much these things meant to her, how she treasured them, was proud of them, lovingly recalled them as an inheritance from her parents.

"This could kill her," one of her friends said to me. I was worried about her. And yet, about 6 months later, we were talking, and I was shocked to hear her say, "In one sense, the burglary was one of the best things that has ever happened to me. I didn't realize it, but I had become tied down to those things. I was afraid to leave the house for fear this might happen. It seems like I spent half my day polishing the silver and keeping up with all that old china. That was really stupid when you think about it. Life ought to be more. I thought I would die after the burglary. But I've come to the conclusion that I may be better off without all that stuff."

This can serve as a parable for how a thief may rip off just that aspect of ourselves that needs ripping off. We cling so tightly to so much stuff. Sometimes, we think of ourselves as collecting things, when the reality is our things are busy controlling us. When things get torn away from us, perhaps it may be possible for us to think of our lives as having improved. We haven't so much lost our possessions as we have regained our lives.

Third, today's scripture comes from a people who had been waiting. We are reading words attributed to Jesus, and they do sound like what Jesus might have said. And yet we are also reading words recorded by Matthew in the context of a church that was waiting.

Jesus had told us, "I'll be back shortly." But one day passed into another and another, and still Jesus had not returned. People waited. The first generation of Christians gradually passed from the scene. People were disappointed by the length of their wait.

Today's gospel was addressed to the people who were growing impatient in waiting.

Therefore, they are addressed to us. When we think about it, a time of disappointed waiting is in a sense the only time the church has ever known. If they got impatient waiting for Jesus for 50 or 60 years, by

the time Matthew's gospel was written, how much greater ought our impatience be with waiting over 2000 years!

To those who had become despairing and disillusioned in waiting, today's gospel said, "Be patient. Hold on. Stay alert. After all, God may come among you like a thief in the night."

A thief? It's a crazy image of God. God slips up on us like a thief. But He is a very strange thief, who comes not to rip us off, but to give us what we need. Sometimes things are taken from us, that cherished possession to which we so tightly cling, in order that we might be free to live more fully for Him. But sometimes, just when we least expect it, this divine thief steals in among us and surprises us with gifts we did not know we wanted – or needed.

In Oscar Hujelos' novel, *Mr. Ives' Christmas*, we meet a wonderful, quiet man who loves God, whose Catholic faith is dear to him, and yet a man who experiences a terrible, terrible tragedy. His beloved son, who was studying for the priesthood, was gunned down one night near Christmas on the street not far from their home.

Mr. Ives was heartbroken, filled with grief for his son, and despite his efforts, filled with hatred for the killer. In the next years, he prayed to God for the grace to forgive, for the strength to get on with his life as best as he could without his son. It is hard for him, very hard.

One day, near Christmas, he was in an office building in Manhattan, and he emerged from an elevator. A clock across the hall seemed to glow with a soft blue light. He stared at it for the longest time as the clock seemed to radiate a soft glow. He felt warm, embraced, summoned by the vision of the softly glowing clock. He finally turned toward the elevator when the door opened. His face was aglow with a smile. He was humming a Christmas carol to himself. A woman on the elevator commented, "Well, you certainly seem to be full of the spirit of the season!"

He never told anyone about the vision. In that visitation, none of his problems were immediately solved. His grief was still there and the challenges of his life were still difficult. Yet he kept that moment in his heart. He pondered it from time to time. Looking back, he remembers it as an undeniable gift of God, a sense that God was with him.

This is Advent, the season of visions, and visitations, and the intrusions of Christ among us. Keep awake. Expectant. Christ loves to come among us in ways we don't expect, in times that we haven't planned. Like a thief, a blessed thief in the night. Amen. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, p 35-38, 2 December 2001)