

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

Starting in high school and continuing since, I've read J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* many, many times. One of the scenes I'm fond of was a moment when the hobbit Bilbo Baggins escaped from Gollum with the famous ring, highlighted in *The Lord of the Ring*, and Gollum calls out after him, "Thief! Thief! Baggins! We hates it forever!" Now being called a thief weighs hard on Bilbo, as it would on anyone. After all, who wants to be called a thief, a robber, someone who steals into a home in the night and takes what belongs to another?

So is Jesus calling God a thief in the night? Is he referring to himself as a thief in the night? Now, Jesus doesn't put it quite like that, he notes however that the activity of God in the world is often very much like flood that no one saw coming until it was too late. God enters into our lives like a thief in the shadows, even as the owner of the house is clueless.

In a way this is one of those things that can drive us to distraction in our thinking about God. We want God to be predictable, understandable, describable, the same way that we want to understand a principle of physics or a law of nature. We think of God coming to us when we are having a difficult time, facing a tough problem, or coming to us in a very moving event, perhaps a beautiful worship service or during a life passage of some sort. We create the mood, the emotion, and assume God will make himself available to us as a sort of genii or something similar.

But this isn't how God works, God enters into our lives on his terms and when he comes into life it is as a gift, an expression of pure grace, and this can't be controlled, can't be anticipated, only welcomed. The more we try to conjure God up into our lives, to get his cooperation in something, it seems the less likely such a summons will work, leastways to our liking.

Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* was a devout Christian, and I think he understood what Jesus was saying because Bilbo the hobbit thief always showed up at the unexpected time, all through Tolkien's story, he makes a discovery, chimes in, or does something seemingly miraculous at the most unexpected time.

And so it is with God, Jesus declares that the moment of Advent, the moment of appearance breaking into life, takes place in the middle of the ordinary and mundane, as fields are worked or grain is milled. Think of the stories you have heard of folks encountering God while having a cup of coffee, driving to work, walking in the woods, sitting on an island, walking through an airport, or when watching television, working around the home, doing homework, while running, walking, cooking, doing nothing at all. Strange places, strange times for God to be at work in our lives. But given God's care and love for us, maybe these aren't such strange times and places after all. Because our Lord always arrives at the perfectly right time and place, just as any thief knows the right time of night and the right house to burgle.

As we begin this Advent season, watch for the unexpected thief who is our God, a thief who is there at the right place and time, sometimes even to take from us burdens, things that can cripple us and prevent us from living a life that is free for and is free in God. And especially though to give to us the gifts of hope, love, joy, peace, especially when we didn't request them or even realize we needed them.

AMEN