

**Advent 1A 2010**  
*Christ the Criminal*

I will never forget a certain cold, crisp day in New Haven, Connecticut, in December, because it was the day I became a victim of a crime. I left the warmth of my apartment, walked onto the cold, crunchy snow, and headed out to my car. But my car was not where I had parked it the day before. Maybe I had parked in the upper parking lot of the seminary. So I headed up the path to the main parking lot. But my car was nowhere to be seen. My worst fear was confirmed: someone had stolen my car.

We know that our world is not safe, and that includes our stuff. Because we know we can be taken advantage of, we put a lot of time and energy into protecting ourselves. We safeguard our computers with firewalls and antivirus programs. We keep personal valuables under lock and key, sometimes in a safety deposit box at the bank. We shred papers with our social security numbers on them and keep an eye on our drivers' licenses, and cover the keypads of ATM machines to protect ourselves from identity theft. But it's not just physical possessions or "stuff" that needs protecting. We protect valuables that cannot physically be seen or touched: our time, our reputations, our way of life, and our energy.

How strange, then, to begin the church year with the image of Jesus as a thief. We just celebrated Christ the King. Now it's Christ the Criminal; the Kingly Kidnapper. (!) As Russell Rathbun wryly noted, "*Nothing raises my holiday spirits like the anticipated threat of Jesus kidnapping someone at work and then breaking into my house and robbing me. And the fun part is, it will all be a surprise! Yeah.*"<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rathbun, Basil. *Waiting on the Felonies of Jesus*,

There must be a reason for the secrecy. There must be a reason why Jesus doesn't come to the front door and ring the doorbell...or send an email...or text-message us, or make an appointment so we can be ready. Maybe it has something to do with the way we are, the way we think and the way we operate. Barbara Brown Taylor said that Jesus has to come as a thief so we won't lock him out. Can it be true, she asks, that we are so broken that only a holy break-in can heal our brokenness? Are we that stubborn? Are we that blind to the truth about ourselves, others, and the world? Could it be that the person who poses the greatest danger to us is the face staring back at us when we look into the mirror? If so, then the threat is not outside the door—it's on the other side of the door; it's inside us, "in our misplaced fears, our misguided defenses." Keeping awake is not about keeping the intruder out, but letting the intruder in. Jesus may be a thief, "but he is God's beloved thief who has come to set us free."

It's a good thing that Jesus ignores our boundaries. It's fortunate that we can't keep Jesus out. Jesus doesn't want the stuff we guard so diligently. Jesus doesn't want our cell phones, credit cards; doesn't want our money—he doesn't want any of our earthly valuables. Jesus only wants one thing: he wants us. Jesus wants us just as he wanted Mary Magdalene, the first evangelist; just as he wanted Peter and Paul; just as he wanted Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr.; just like he wants the people on death row, the people in City Hall, the soldiers on the battlefield, the nurses in the hospitals and the teachers in the schools. Jesus wants each and every one of us. In order to get us, Jesus is not going to come to us like an earthly king—with trumpets, pomp and circumstance, and a gaggle of reporters in tow. If he did that, we would find a way to protect ourselves. So Jesus will arrive when we are not expecting him, when our defenses are down. He'll be quiet, subtle and unpredictable.

Herbert O'Driscoll said that at an unexpected hour, "there comes into all our lives something that tests us deeply, that demands we come to terms with it, that forces us to be accountable about what we have and what we are, that will turn us back to what we really believe, that will require a grace beyond ourselves, if we are adequately to respond. Suppose this is true. Then maybe our Lord is saying to us, *Keep [spiritually] awake...be [spiritually] ready.*"

There is nothing I could have done to prevent the thieves from stealing my car in the dead of night. I may always regret that. There is nothing I can do to prevent Jesus from breaking into my house and stealing my heart. I hope I will never regret that.