

**Sermon for ADVENT IV**  
**The Venerable Patricia Soukup**  
**Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church**  
**Los Alamos, New Mexico**  
**December 18, 2022**

**Isaiah 7:10-16**  
**Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18**  
**Romans 1:1-7**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, o Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.*

A few years ago, I found myself drawn into a game that I had never heard of before – a game called Sardines. I'm sure that many of our younger members here have played it, but in case you have never heard of it or had the opportunity to experience this game, it is sort of like Hide and Seek in reverse. It is best played at night, with all of the lights turned off. Everyone gathers outside the house or building, and one person is chosen to be the sardine, or "it". This person goes inside the darkened house or building and hides. After counting to 100, the rest of the players enter the dark house or building and attempt to find the sardine without turning on any lights. People stumble around and bump into each other and into things while trying to find the sardine.

The twist to this game is that when someone does happen to find the sardine, this player must quietly join the sardine in the chosen hiding place, which is usually quite small. One by one, the other players discover the hiding place, and they too must hide in that same spot. The larger the group, the more interesting the game gets. A tiny space is suddenly crammed with many people all trying to be quiet and to conceal themselves from the remaining seekers while trying to figure out who has joined the group and who is missing (all in the dark, of course). The result of this is predictable: soon the remaining seekers are drawn to the whispers and giggles emanating from a shower stall or from a closet or from beneath a bed. What begins as a secret held by one person soon becomes a collective source of excitement that cannot be contained, and everyone is drawn into it.

In our reading from Isaiah, we hear how God intended to build his heritage through the house of David, from which, of course, Joseph was descended. God and humankind would now be brought together in the person of Jesus – Immanuel – "God with us". And now, in Matthew's Gospel, God speaks to Joseph in a dream and lets him in on the secret plan in which he plays a critical role. And of course, in Luke's Gospel, which we did not read today, Mary learns that she will be the vessel of God's grace. And her response is, "My soul magnifies the Lord." She knew that she was now exuding the glory of God. When she said, "Yes" to God, her joy could not be contained, and the secret that was revealed only to her and to Joseph would soon be known to the whole world.

You know, this sounds vaguely like a conspiracy to me – a conspiracy to bring together those who stumble around in the darkness and unite them in an unconventional way – by inviting them into the heart and life of God. Willard Davis, the author of *The Divine Conspiracy*, talks about the problem with this invitation. “A door of welcome seems open to everyone without exception,” Davis says. “But the major problem with the invitation now is precisely overfamiliarity. Familiarity breeds unfamiliarity, and even contempt. People think they have heard the invitation. They think they have accepted it – or rejected it. But they have not. The difficulty today is to hear it at all. But that is part of the divine conspiracy.”

I could not have imagined the fun and excitement of Sardines had I not been coerced into participating in it. This particular game actually took place at the Cathedral, which as most of you know is a rather vast building with lots of nooks and crannies for hiding. Many of us ignored the mundane and obvious areas at first as we began our quest for the sardine; we sought out more obscure and unusual hiding places. But we soon discovered that we were alone in these places.

One by one we found our way to a broom closet, and we could hardly contain our laughter as we found ourselves sitting in mop buckets and standing in trash cans to try to pack more people into the increasingly smaller space. The last thing on my mind when I arrived at the Cathedral that evening for a meeting was stumbling around the building in the dark and ultimately squishing myself into a broom closet with 14 other people, most of whom I didn't know. Once I was involved, however, I realized that rather than concealing myself from someone, I was part of a crazy and playful conspiracy to bring everyone together in a very ordinary place as we stumbled upon one another in the dark (figuratively and literally).

I believe that as we stumble upon Christ in the darkness of the very ordinary and mundane places in our lives, our humanity magnifies the glory of God as we playfully invite others who are also stumbling around and searching to crowd in with us. Rather than hiding, we must allow ourselves to be drawn into a holy game of Sardines, as it were, with the incarnate God who comes stealthily among us. We are, after all, part of the divine conspiracy. We are called to search out the sacredness of God's kingdom in the very ordinary aspects of our lives and invite others to recognize and rejoice in this sacredness. And it is here that God is magnified.

How is this divine conspiracy unfolding and how is Christ being revealed among us here at Trinity-on-the-Hill? When fires and floods ravaged so many communities in the state this past summer, you reached out to help with donations of food, supplies, and money. This past autumn, you stepped up to provide school supplies for refugee children arriving in Albuquerque. And I was amazed when I learned how many charitable organizations not only in Los Alamos but all across the diocese benefit from the proceeds from the sale of items donated to the Shop on the Corner. Opportunities to serve our brothers and sisters are constantly arising, and it is in these activities that God incarnate slips in and invites us to participate in the heart and life of God.

It is in these very ordinary and mundane activities that Christ comes to us, and it is in these ministries that the glory of God is magnified through us. Some of these activities may be new to us and may seem scary or uncomfortable at first. We may be quiet and secretive about

them because we don't exactly know what we are doing, but Jesus challenges us to bring others alongside us, and soon we find that these activities are a source of joy and fulfillment for many. And it is in bringing others alongside us in our ordinary and mundane activities here at Trinity-on-the-Hill that we make others part of the divine conspiracy and invite them into the heart and life of God in a way that is not rejected or ignored.

The American essayist Hamilton Wright Mabie wrote, "Blessed is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love!" It is through this divine conspiracy of love that we have been made heirs of God's eternal kingdom. God calls us not to hide from others but to seek them out as fellow heirs of this kingdom.

Some of you may have seen a YouTube video a few years ago that quickly went viral after it was posted. A five-year-old girl was singing in her school's Christmas program. This in itself is not unusual. What is unusual, however, is that both of the girl's parents were deaf, although the child herself was able to hear. In this video, the girl is shown singing with her classmates. As the classmates continue to sing and clap, the girl turns toward her parents in the audience and interprets for them in American Sign Language what the other children are singing. This little girl wanted her parents to be able to participate with her in this celebration, and she drew them into her joy in the only way that she knew they could understand. In the video, the children beside the girl stop singing and look at her quizzically at first, then once they realize what she is doing, they continue singing more enthusiastically than ever. After all, it is their message that the girl is interpreting for her deaf parents.

Joseph awoke from his dream and said, "Yes" to what he knew was a crazy and dangerous divine conspiracy. Mary also said "Yes" to this divine conspiracy and brought Jesus to the waiting world. As we near the end of this season of Advent and prepare to welcome the Christ Child, I ask you to consider this question: Do you pass by deafly when there are whispers and giggles coming from God's kingdom, or do you stumble around a bit to discover the source of this joy and join with others to become part of God's divine conspiracy of love?

Amen.