

1st Advent, 2006
12/3/2006
Luke 21:25-31
St. Augustine's Church

As a child, I revered the board-game Monopoly. In some ways, I still do, demanding that Robert rise to the glory of the uncurbed, unmitigated capitalism of the game at least once a year. How I rejoice when I purchase all three deeds for one color of property, and how I adore turning some two bit piece of land into my own personal, fake money fortune. The yellows and greens have always been my big money makers. But what I loved best about Monopoly, at least when I was a child, was my cunning duplicity in the game. As a youth, I always played with a certain cousin, and we reveled in cheating, being two-faced. We would smile at one another; laugh as though we were allies, as though my speed-racing car and her steaming boat game piece could work together, all the while stealing from each other's cash stash. It became an integral part of the game. And when one of us eventually won the game hours later (because the game always took hours), the shaming of the loser, not to mention protestations of "Cheater" by said loser would begin. Monopoly was the most wonderful part of a visit to my cousin's house. Luckily, I have grown out of that desire to cheat.

That is, until recently. For my installation a few weeks ago, a parishioner here gave me a game. Some of you may have seen it in my office. It is prominently displayed on my Brady Bunch era credenza. And the game is a version of Monopoly called Episcopopoly, classified as a game of stewardship. And I am ecstatic about this game. I love how it looks. For me, the game not only ranks high on the kitsch factor, sitting next to my "Last Supper After Dinner Mints" and across from my Jesus Action Figure. Episcopopoly is also wonderful because I have adored Monopoly for so long. Immediately after the installation, I opened the box. I laughed at the changes that were made. The properties are all church properties. For example, Park Place is the National Cathedral in Washington, and the object is to build churches and steeples, not hotels. Instead of a banker, there is a Senior Warden. And there is no jail, only fund-raising. And there is also a new addition. As opposed to simply tucking the money under the board of the game, as we all do, there are miniature wooden offertory plates to hold the loot. All of that is wonderful and contributes to the all-important religious-kitsch factor. But that, my friends, unfortunately is where my love of the game Episcopopoly ceases. I apologize to the very kind person who gave it to me. But as I read the rules of the game, I realized that they had destroyed the entire fun of monopoly. First, there is no rent, only offerings. And no one can go bankrupt in Episcopopoly. Debt is simply paid off at the player's leisure. Therefore, no one can ever lose. And then the worst... As opposed to someone winning, and enjoying the spoils of a hard-fought, competitive game, once a church is built and completed, everyone proceeds to that space for a prayer and dedication service, and the game is over. There is no room for two-faced fun or gloating or charging ridiculous rents. There is no shaming, no underhanded stealing, and no monopolies. Only..... Only Lordly kindness and stewardship. It only brings up the temptation to want to cheat.

Today, in a world that is much more like monopoly than Episcopopoly, I would like to talk about Monopoly, Episcopopoly and God. I want to explore the nature of God through the polarities of

the most enjoyable Monopoly and the only slightly entertaining but ultimately snoring, boring Episcopopoly. After all, Monopoly is indeed based on how our markets operate. Monopoly was designed to be a teaching tool to that end. And many do approach our markets as I approached that game: We are often out to protect solely our own interests. We sometimes forget to care for our competitors, I mean co-inhabitants of the earth. And we are also often two-faced, not saying, for better or worse, how we really feel about something or someone for a whole host of reasons. And then there is what is really troubling about a Monopoly world. Often, many people view the world through such a monopolistic lens that they cannot imagine even God as being different than such a board game.

God for many is also two-faced. To many, God can be loving and open-armed one minute and full of apocalyptic desolation and judgement the next. In such a scenario, God is simply playing Monopoly against a Satanic figure: attempting to get the right deeds, namely, us, and we are hopefully “saved,” as God drives Satan into bankruptcy, never allowing Satan to pass go or collect two hundred souls. And if that seems extreme, or we might boast as Episcopalians that we have evolved past such a dualistic understanding of God. Well, then, on this First Sunday of Advent, I feel that I must point out that the idea that God and the world are two faced are not alone. There is another celebrated seasonal entity who falls into this genre. Perhaps you remember: “He’s making a list, He’s checking it twice, He’s gonna find out who’s naughty or nice..... He knows when you’ve been bad or good, So be good for goodness sake!”

Be good or else, presents or a lump of coal, is the message often heard about society, about God, and even from you guessed it, Santa. It is all a message of my worst monopoly playing writ large. I would like to think that we are exempt from such feelings, but I know that even for my own self, such ideas are pervasive: we project onto God our own feelings of shame, self-dislike, e negativity, and judgement. And sometimes, that image holds more of our faith than the truth of the goodness of God and we end up acting out of that fear and not out of a response to the goodness of God.

From the Gospel of Luke we hear: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”

Such words have been used to inspire fear about how God comes into our world. The boss is coming; look busy. The heavens are angry: Crouch down. But as we are Christians preparing for Christmas, we have to say that instead, we know that God comes into this world as Christ already has. In the middle of the chaos, and the signs, and the roaring seas, and our Monopoly-like sad projections about God, God comes on a cloud with a type of power and great glory that we un-used to seeing: the power of vulnerability in a child born to Middle-Eastern peasant parents and the glory found in a baby sleeping in an animal’s barn stall. And the clouds only appear on the day of his death. This power and glory of Jesus are not about monopoly power and glory. Instead of God is coming, look busy, it is God is coming, be loved!

Normally, I preach about our responsibility in our relationships with God. I do believe that Jesus came to the earth to help teach us how to save our own world. I am firmly convinced that we have a role in God's redemption of this world. But from the Advent of Jesus: his life, ministry, his death, and coming back to life, we know that God is also continually coming to us, reaching out to us. It is not only us that has a part to play in the redemption of this world. God is also working toward our redemption. Even if we are in the very depths of our own hells, God is there, attempting to bring each and every one of us into the love of God. And God is never two faced, juggling between punishing and love, even when our hells are of our own creating. We need not fear duplicity in our God. And because of God's unfailing love and desire to reach out to us, we as a people of faith have to trust that there will be and can be a time in this world when wars, hostile divisions in relationships, and the inability to see the needs of others will come to an end. We have to trust that there can be and will be a new age for humanity.

During Advent, we are not only preparing to meet God as we have known God in Jesus, we also remember that as Christians, we hope and pray and work toward a new world based on God and not our monopolistic projections. However, I must also say that the alternative will not be like Episcopopoly where the rules are established, goodness is enforced, there is no creativity, and there is no danger of a more duplicitous choice. Instead this new age will be repeatedly negotiated through a living, free-will, freely chosen relationship between us and our living God, and our goal will not only be building a church but also building a better world. Often, what we see of God is our own projection, another Monopoly board. But we work toward and trust, instead, in a time when as God looks at us, God sees God's own reflection shining back toward heaven. And that time, a new kingdom, is what we prepare for in Advent, and ideally the whole year round.