

Smokey's handshake: Passing the peace in Advent

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I'm listening to the cautioning words of the Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent: "Keep awake!" Smokey sits still next to me. I am surprised, since he's usually getting up and down throughout worship.

He's often the first person to arrive for the 11:00 service, though I have no idea how he gets here. He doesn't talk much. I don't know how old he is, maybe in his fifties. His hair is kind of crazy. His clothing is on the shabby side, and occasionally he will accessorize with a necktie around his head; today he sports a stretchy headband worn across his forehead.

Smokey carries a walking stick; it's nothing polished and fancy, just a solid branch torn from a tree. Sometimes he'll beat the stick against the pew in time with the music. Rather than joining the melody or harmony of the hymns with his voice, he

provides percussion.

When he leaves, it's often to go outside and smoke a cigarette. A couple of months ago, on a Sunday when the weather was nice, I was sitting in the back of the sanctuary, ready to greet whoever came in late for worship. At this New York City church, there are a lot of latecomers. Smokey walked outside to sit on the front steps and have a cigarette. The open doors invited cool breezes inside, which also invited smoke rings, courtesy of Smokey. The haze floated up the steps toward the sanctuary, as if paving a way for the graceful entrance of the Holy Spirit.

But today Smokey is parked in the wooden pew next to me, and he doesn't smell nice. He beats his stick against the pew in front of him. I notice his hands, brown with ground-in dirt. How in the world did he get so dirty? All I can think about is the fact that, later in the service, we'll be sharing the peace in preparation for Holy Communion. I look down at my own well-washed hands and neatly trimmed nails. What if I have to shake this guy's hand?

To add to my squeamishness, Smokey's nose is running. In the middle of the sermon, I see him take a napkin out of his pocket. I brace myself. He loudly blows his nose into the napkin. Then he abruptly gets up from the pew and wanders to the back of the sanctuary. After standing there for a moment, he walks toward the front along a side aisle, to a small altar space beside the worship area, where he's in sight of every worshiper. The pastor in the pulpit notices him, her eyes drawn toward the uncharacteristic movement. Is she nervous? Does she wonder what he's going to do next?

As it turns out, he does nothing. He just stands there. The pastor finishes her sermon, and the congregation sings.

"Let all mortal flesh keep silence . . ."

I wish, I think to myself. I love silence.

"and with fear and trembling stand . . ."

Nothing trembles, but I still feel the rafters shaking from the sound of Smokey's nose.

"Ponder nothing earthly minded . . ."

Why don't I carry Purell with me? Or at least a handkerchief?

"For with blessing in his hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand."

When the time comes to share the peace, I shake hands with everyone I can find, but Smokey is nowhere to be seen. Whew. My clean hands are safe. As I make my way back to my seat, however, he appears and grabs my hand before I have the chance to check whether he left the sanctuary in order to wash his hands. Smokey begins his ritual: a secret handshake so secret that no one knows how to do it. Smokey leads the way: never explaining, only teaching with his actions. He grabs my hand and pulls it toward him, then pushes my hand away, and then he twists my arm up and down until we're each supposed to snap our fingers. I guess this might look really cool if I knew what we were doing, but I don't. I just look confused. On this particular day, Smokey lifts our grasped hands high above his head, and then twirls himself underneath.

I have to laugh.

This is some high-quality peace-sharing: a glimpse of the kingdom of God breaking into this world. The poetry of the hymn speaks truth in reality, and indeed I see that Christ our God to earth descends, with blessing in his hand. It would be my loss to refuse to shake this hand that is offered to me, to miss out on the invitation to share a handshake and a dance. The same hand that is covered in dirt and mucus is covered in the glory of God. This is the hand that shares God's peace with me. This hand nudges me—continues nudging me—to keep awake.