

First Sunday of Advent, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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It can be really hard to find an activity that will appeal to adults, teenagers, and small children all at the same time—as anyone who has played Go Fish or Candyland for any length of time can tell you. But for a few years in the late 80s, my family had cracked the code. Whenever we had friends or family over for Thanksgiving or some other holiday, my dad would gather us together for a game that everyone could play. He would put on a cape and get out a big walking stick and call himself the rug wizard. We had wall-to-wall carpet in our living room, so he could draw all sorts of shapes in the napp of the carpet—shapes that looked vaguely like magical symbols or nonsense letters. The rug writing game was a little involved as games go, but I'll try to explain it succinctly. Basically, the group all gathers with the rug wizard in the living room and chooses one person to go out in the hallway and cover their ears. Once that person has left, the group chooses an object in the room—a lamp, or a sofa, or even a person. The person comes in from the hallway and has to guess what the object is by looking at the symbols that the rug wizard writes on the carpet. The rug wizard draws circles and squares and different designs on the carpet and tells the person who has to guess the object that all the answers are in the designs. The rug wizard also makes up nonsense phrases while drawing on the carpet with their staff—funny sentences about how all wisdom lives in the symbols on the rug and that a truly wise mind will be able to glean the answers by searching for the meaning in the symbols. It's hilarious to watch this poor person looking at all the shapes and squiggles on the floor while trying to figure out what they have to do with the object in the room they are trying to guess. It's all good for a laugh.

The whole game is a trick of course. If you know the trick of the game, you know that the clues to knowing what the hidden object is aren't actually being written on the carpet. The carpet writing is a misdirect. The actual clues are in the spoken nonsense that the rug wizard is saying. There is a simple code in the nonsense sentences that has to do with letters that will eventually spell LAMP or SOFA. The reason that the game is fun is that, by asking us to focus on the writing, we usually don't realize that the answers are actually in the words. And once you know the trick of the game, you can never unknow it.

This isn't the only game that uses misdirection—magicians like to use misdirection in their tricks as do comedians in their comedy. But I think there are some more sinister misdirections out.

Strangely enough, I actually think about misdirection a lot when I am rinsing my recycling. For the last 25 years, I have been told by the world that it is up to me to save the planet by making sure I rinse the peanut butter out of my jar and get it into the correct bin. I, and almost everyone I know, talk about recycling like the gospel of being a good citizen. And, let me be clear, there's nothing wrong with getting your plastics into the blue bin. But the thing is, I didn't create all that plastic, and neither did you. There are enormous and powerful entities that exist in the world that have a lot more say in whether something ends up in a landfill or not—not to mention are operating on a scale orders of magnitude larger than a single household, or a single church for that matter. Large companies, school districts, municipalities, and even countries have massive

power, leverage, and the economic clout to make the kind of dent in the climate crisis that no amount of peanut butter scraping ever can. And yet, the narrative for decades has been that the end user needs to recycle or all is lost. If I were a cynical person, I might wonder what it is we are being distracted from when we're told to scrub our jars. Could it be that by looking so hard at my own bin, I'm not paying attention to the big, structural, political and financial systems that might actually make a real change? Don't look at the shapes, listen to the words.

Another example: Over and over again, I see the headlines about what is happening in the national news. These headlines are splashy and designed to get our hackles up. They play on our fears of people who think and act differently than we do, and they rile us up about figures in Washington DC whom we will never spend any time speaking to. I think that these national headlines act in a way like a soap opera—swinging our moods from one extreme to another. And while we are looking day after day at national news, the political work all around us—in the community, in the municipality, in the state in which we live—happens and has an enormous impact on our lives and the lives of our neighbors. Zoning, housing, education, local politics. I think these struggles lack some of the sexiness as the national headlines, and so we are invited to ignore what happens at the local level, even though it is precisely these local issues that directly impact our lives. If I were a cynical person, I might wonder what is happening when we have our televisions and computer screens always turned to the biggest, flashiest story and our local news doesn't make the cut. Don't look at the shapes, listen to the words.

But what does that have to do with Advent? The readings today, and throughout all of Advent, are about waking up. They are about paying attention to what is real and what it is that God is doing in our lives. Even during the time of the Gospel writers, our spiritual forebears warned us that it is easy to be taken in by a narrative that isn't true—be it from a government, or a company, or a church. We're susceptible to story, which is wonderful with the story is the birth of Christ, but it's less great when the story is a lie being told by the world. The readings today and for this whole season are about shaking off those things that are not true and drawing closer to the coming of God among us on Christmas morning. They tell you the king is in a palace. We know the king is a baby in a barn. They tell you the poor are worthless. We know the poor will receive the kingdom of God. They tell you Mary is meek and mild. We know that she is the Queen of Heaven who said yes when the world needed it the most. The world is in the business of misdirection, and Advent is the season of the church year when we as a community try to get very clear what is real and what is not. It can be hard to see what is true, to cut through the noise, to notice the trick in the game. But God has given us the prophets, the saints, the church, one another to help us wake up and prepare for the coming of Jesus. Don't look at the shapes. Listen to the words. Amen.