

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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What Did You Expect?

In 1976 NASA's Viking 1 mission snapped pictures of a feature on the surface of Mars. One picture was published with the description: "huge rock formation... which resembled a human head," and it did look like a face. The scientists at NASA didn't really think that the object in the photo was a giant human head carved into the top of a mountain on Mars. They just thought it was an interesting way to describe the formation, but it didn't take long for that possibility to capture the public's imagination. Even when they published in the next few days an explanation that the feature was probably just a pile of rocks that only resembled a face because of the way the light was hitting it, the theories of ancient alien cultures on Mars were already flying around. And this was before Facebook. It was much like a century earlier when astronomers saw what they believed to be canals on the surface of Mars, and took them to be evidence of civilization, fueling fears that Martians might invade us. When better telescopes were developed, with higher resolution, it was easy to see that those canals were actually just natural features on the planet's surface. The same thing happened for the face-like feature too. In the late 1990s, NASA's Mars Global Surveyor took more pictures of the surface with a better camera, and guess what. The face turned out to be just a pile of rocks.

The point is that humans often see what we expect to see. Not that we were expecting to see a face on the surface of Mars, but we seem to be hardwired to see faces. We see them everywhere. The Blessed Virgin Mary on a piece of toast. Jim Morrison in a water stain on the ceiling. Bernie Sanders on a potato... well, Bernie Sanders does kind of resemble a potato, but you get the point. We see things that we expect to see.

The converse is true too. We often fail to see what we don't expect to see. Everyone who has had a freshman Psychology class has learned about the experiment in selective attention where the subjects were shown a brief film of several people playing basketball, some of them in white shirts, some in black shirts. The subjects were asked to count how many times the people in the white shirts passed the basketball. After they watched the film, they were asked to report how many passes they counted. Then they were asked if they saw the gorilla. That's right, the gorilla. In the middle of the basketball players at one point in the film someone wearing a gorilla suit comes out, walks to the middle of the screen, shakes his arms up and down, then walks off. The gorilla is on screen for 9 seconds. Still, most people did not see the gorilla. Why? Because they were not looking for a gorilla. Their brains were so focused on counting the passes of the ball, they just missed it. I have mentioned this experiment to my children as they started learning to drive, because we can look both ways before we pull out onto a road, and because we are looking for a car, we can miss the motorcycle coming down the street. We often fail to see what we are not looking for.

Today we begin the season of Advent, the season of hopeful and expectant waiting. Waiting for Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, his first coming. Waiting for his second coming, the day of which no one knows, even Jesus didn't know. He advised us to stay awake, and keep watch. During this season of expectation and waiting, we are not waiting passively, just waiting around for God to do something. We are rather waiting with hopeful expectation, waiting and watching for the kingdom of God to break into this world.

Remember, we tend to see what we expect to see, what we are looking for, and we can fail to see what we are not looking for. I know, you're thinking that we often mistakenly see things that are not there, like a face on Mars. After Elvis died, he was seen in major cities and

small towns all over the country. I think he travelled more after his death than he ever did while he was alive. So is this a good thing, if we often see what we are expecting to see, even if it isn't really there? I think it can be. I think that our ability to see what isn't there is a divine characteristic. It's part being created in the image of God. I'm not talking about seeing what isn't there, as in misperception or self-delusion. I'm talking about the ability of an architect to look at a vacant lot and to see a beautiful building, and to transfer that vision to paper, and finally to see it realized in concrete and steel. We are created in the image of the God who looked at the formless void and saw a universe, then with a word he created it.

As we wait in hopeful anticipation of the coming of Christ, we watch with the full expectation of seeing him. If we do that, if we look carefully and with discipline for the divine life to be revealed in our midst, we are likely to see it. If we seek Christ in each other in order to serve Christ in each other, as our Baptismal covenant calls us to do, we will see the Christ revealed to us in the stranger, in the poor, in the child, in the person with special needs, in our neighbor across the street. If we don't bother to look for him, we will miss him.

Advent is the time for us to employ our holy imagination. How else can we look at 156 families signed up to receive Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets, when we are a church of only 88 pledging units, and believe that we have any hope in feeding them? How else can we look at conflict, anger, disappointment, and resentment and believe that we have any hope in healing our nation? Our only hope is that God will act, that God will break through the hopelessness that surrounds us, and establish a reason for hope. But of course, God has already done that.

Jesus said, "About the day and the hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." That means to me that it could be any moment. What if it could

be ANY moment, even this moment right now? I mean, what if the thief breaks in every night? What if Christ comes again and again, *any* and potentially *every* moment? If we were awake and watching for the coming of the Son of Man, we would see him, and if we were paying attention we would act accordingly. If we fail to watch, if we allow ourselves to be distracted by the pleasures, or the concerns, of this world, we will miss him. Look at how many people missed him the first time around. How many times a day do we miss Jesus in our midst because we fail to look for him?

Amen.