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Advent 4A
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2017

Instead of a formal sermon this morning, I'd like to share a story with you. A story about a girl who witnessed something that changed her life. It's called...

LYDIA'S SECRET

Lydia was very good at keeping secrets. It was a skill she'd had plenty of time practicing during her 12 years as the youngest of three daughters in the Cunningham family.

For example, Lydia knew about her best friend Roberta's pierced belly button.
And she knew about which girl at school had a crush on which boy.

Lydia knew some family secrets, too. Each year she would help her Mom with last minute Christmas gift wrapping, so she knew who was getting what before just about anyone.

And she knew other things—like where her two older sisters Hannah and Cara really went one Friday night last spring.

Lydia knew all this and much more. And because she was considered trustworthy, lots of people confided in her.

So it seemed fitting when, early one Saturday morning just before dawn, while everyone else in the house was still asleep, and even the dogs in the neighborhood were quiet, Lydia found herself awake (as sometimes happened) and witnessed something outside her window.

You see, the Cunninghams had just gotten new neighbors. The Ahmad family, refugees from Syria, had just arrived the day before, and had moved into the rental house across the street and two doors down.

Now usually when someone moves in, you see a moving van or a U-HAUL truck out in front of their house. But with the Ahmads, it was different.

First a taxi pulled up, and a man, a woman, and three children came piling out. A few minutes later a man in a pickup came by with a few suite cases and two large boxes. That was it.

Lydia later learned that the Ahmads had lost their home and nearly all their possessions in the civil war that plagued their country. They were starting their lives over, in a new town in a new country with a new language and new neighbors.

But let's get back to what Lydia saw outside her window...

When Lydia looked out her bedroom window early that Saturday morning, what she saw was the quiet shadow of a man—just who she couldn't quite make out—crossing the street and noiselessly placing a package on the Ahmad's front porch.

Then, just as quietly as he'd come, the man slipped off the porch and was gone.

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Lydia didn't know what to think. Her curiosity was shifting into high gear.

The way the man moved was vaguely familiar to her—who was he?
And what was in the package he'd left on their porch?

This was a mystery of the first order, and Lydia was determined to solve it.

Later that morning, Lydia went with her mother to introduce themselves to their new neighbors. They brought a tray of cinnamon rolls along with them, which they'd baked as a welcome gift.

Peering out from behind their mother's skirt, the Ahmad children were shy, but curious.
Their parents smiled appreciatively, clearly exhausted from their ordeal. Even though they couldn't communicate well because of the language barrier, the family seemed grateful.

Lydia noticed that the box she'd spied early that morning was no longer on the porch.
But there was a box inside the kitchen, filled with fruit, which the children were enjoying,
along with their cinnamon rolls.

COULD THAT BOX HAVE BEEN THE PACKAGE WHICH THE MAN LEFT EARLIER THAT MORNING?

All week long, Lydia thought about it. She decided to get up early the next Saturday morning, just in case the mystery man might make another appearance. She set her alarm for 4:30am.

When the alarm went off, Lydia was deep into her dream world, and it took a moment for her to figure out where she was and why her alarm had gone off so early.

But once she got her bearings, she put on her slippers, took out her flashlight, and tiptoed downstairs to the living room. There, in front of the big picture window, she would have a better view of the neighbor's house than from her room.

She pulled some pillows off the couch, put them on the floor by the window, then wrapped herself in an afghan and plopped down. Outside it was still dark.

10 minutes passed, nothing happened. 20 more minutes passed, the street was still deserted.
Lydia started to nod off, but woke with a start when her drooping head bonked the window.

She looked out on the street, and there, across the way, with something tucked under his arm, was the man. She couldn't see well enough to make out his features, but she noticed his bowed legs, and his short, quick gait.

He walked to the Ahmad's porch, put the package down carefully, turned to look both ways, and began to leave. Only this time, he crossed to her side of the street.

Lydia's heart skipped a beat; she pulled the afghan over her head and made herself still. Then, just as he was about to pass in front of the window, the overhead light in the living room clicked on. Lydia spun around—it was her sister Cara!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? asked Cara, startled.
TURN OFF THE LIGHT! Lydia pleaded, in a desperate whisper. But it was too late.

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Whirling back to the window, Lydia saw the man staring straight at her and she gasped.
Their eyes locked. He lifted a finger to his lips; then, turning quickly, he was gone.

Lydia knew that face. It was Mr. Polanski!

Mr. Polanski was a plumber, and had been in their home one winter, several years before, when the water pipes in their kitchen froze during a long cold snap.
Lydia was home from school that day, recovering from the flu.

She remembered hearing the accent in Mr. Polanski's voice when he spoke to her mother.
Her parents had been very pleased with how quickly Mr. Polanski was able to fix the problem.
Her Dad called him "an old Pro."

Mr. Polanski had been retired from plumbing for two years now, but he enjoyed gardening, and that's where he spent much of his time.

As Lydia thought about all of this,

- she wondered why Mr. Polanski was bringing things to their new neighbors,
- why he was doing it in secret,
- what he was going to do now that she knew.
- And she wondered what she was going to do, too.

The next morning, on their way out the door to church, the Cunninghams found a small flat of fresh picked blackberries, tomatoes, and cucumbers at the side door of their home.
On the way to church they all buzzed about who might have left them.

Each of them had their own theory—each of them, that is, except Lydia.
For Lydia knew where they came from. And now she knew what she must do.

That afternoon, Lydia did an internet search and found where Mr. Polanski lived.
She got on her bike to ride to his home, which was only a few blocks away.

When she saw his address for the first time, she rode on by, pretending not to notice.

Circling back, she rode by again—this time more slowly.

Finally, on her third pass she stopped, parked her bike and walked slowly to the front door.

She rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. She rang it again.
This time a voice called out:

COME AROUND THE SIDE - I'M IN THE GARDEN. It was Mr. Polanski.

Lydia came around the side of the house and looked over the gate to the backyard.
Mr. Polanski, kneeling in the garden, looked up and once again their eyes met. There was a hint of something—was it amusement?—on his face as he motioned for her to come through the gate.

Lydia lifted the latch and came over to where Mr. Polanski was working.
She stood silently for a few moments, not knowing exactly how to start the conversation.
Then, Mr. Polanski broke the silence.

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SO, NOW YOU KNOW MY SECRET, EH? he said.

Lydia nodded as she waited for what he would say next.

Slowly, Mr. Polanski put down his trowel, stood up, ambled over to a bench at the edge of the garden, and sat down.

COME HERE, MY YOUNG FRIEND, he said, patting the bench, I TELL YOU STORY.

Lydia walked over and sat down.

She learned that Mr. Polanski had been 14 years old when World War II began.
His family was forced to flee their hometown as bombs fell, and during the chaos he became separated from them.

He alone had managed to survive the War and to make his way out of Poland and eventually to Greece and finally to America.

When he arrived in the United States at age 16, Mr. Polanski had nothing but the clothes on this back. A kind man gave him a job as a plumber's assistant, and offered him the backroom of his home as a place to stay.

The young Polanski accepted, and decided that plumbing would be his trade.
Mr. Polanski had experienced the generosity of someone he didn't know. He'd never forgotten what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land, trying to make a go of it.

He'd made a promise to GOD that he would show the same kind of generosity to whomever God placed in front of <u>his</u> path, and he'd been keeping that promise now for nearly 60 years.

The Ahmads were the most recent recipients of his gifts.

Lydia was amazed by what she heard. There was <u>so much more</u> to Mr. Polanski than she could have possibly imagined.

When he finished telling his story, the two of them sat there, quietly…. Finally, Lydia spoke.

MR. POLANSKI, she said, I'M A GOOD PERSON FOR KEEPING SECRETS.
BUT TODAY I LEARNED THAT SOME SECRETS ARE TOO GOOD <u>NOT</u> TO TELL.
IS IT ALRIGHT IF I SHARE YOUR STORY WITH MY FAMILY?

Mr. Polanski looked at Lydia and shrugged. WHY NOT? he said with a smile.

The next morning, when Mr. Polanski walked out to his garden, there, waiting on the garden bench, was a plate full of fresh cinnamon rolls.

Not only was Lydia learning how to tell the story, she was learning how it live it.

Amen.