

Isaiah 2:1-5 ~ Matthew 24:36-44
When Will We See You Again?
 First Sunday of Advent ~ December 1, 2019
 Communion Meditation
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Touch is the miracle. --Walt Whitman

Introduction to Scripture:

Did anyone else eat too much on Thanksgiving? For us, there was the turkey, the stuffing, the cranberry sauce, the Swedish meatballs, the yams topped with marshmallows, the mashed potatoes with plenty of butter and roasted garlic, the roasted Brussel sprouts glazed with maple syrup (who ever said a once scorned vegetable couldn't be "born again"). So many different dishes, that your second plate wasn't even seconds. I haven't even mentioned the desserts—the best part being that second piece of pumpkin pie, consumed perhaps standing up without the distraction of a plate or a fork.

Does any of that sound like your Thanksgiving experience? I think we all know how to feast on great food. And we know how to *get ready* for such a feast. There's the housecleaning, the tablecloth pressing, the silver polishing, the table setting, then there's the *tricky* timing so that all foods are ready at the same time-- without being overdone or undercooked. Did anybody's turkey get done too early? Too late? They say 15-20 minutes per pound, but somehow, every year, it never seems quite that simple. New calculations, new theories on how to test the doneness. Or is that only in our house?

We seem to know how to prepare for the feast we call Thanksgiving—but *what about getting ready for Christmas, that is the birth of Christ?* Here we are in church on the First Sunday of Advent, and I am your preacher--so you know where this is going. Here, as the body of Christ we call FPC, we are getting ready for the coming of Christ. Advent means "coming." So *how do we prepare* to celebrate the coming of God into our world, clothed in flesh like any other wet, crying, hungry, human baby about 2,000 years ago? And at the same time, how do we prepare for the Second Coming, the Second Advent of Christ. Our season of Advent that begins today and continues through Christmas Eve, celebrates and anticipates *both comings*: the one that already happened and the one we are still waiting for. If you find it difficult to get your spirit in gear for the countdown to Dec. 25, getting in gear for the Second Coming may help. The Second Coming adds a forward projection we might otherwise miss.

Jesus has a lot to say "about that day and hour," just as the disciples were wondering (and freaking out about) just how many doors to put on their Advent Calendars for Christ's return. Listen how he shifts their attention from the idea of "GETTING ready" to living in a state of BEING ready, as he teaches them to let go of the "when" question.

Meditation:

Question: When will we see you again, Christ? Answer: We do not know. In fact, we just heard Jesus push this point by saying that not even the angels or he, the Son of God, knows. *Only God knows*-- And He or She is not telling us when—not in a way that we can put it on our calendars. Jesus seems to be OK with that. Are we? How are we supposed to get ready, if we don't know when our honored guest is arriving? When do we put the turkey in? Once again, I think we are asking the wrong question.

When you were young, did your family, or did your church talk much about the Second Coming a.k.a the rapture? Bobby Jo Valentine, the singer-song writer and story teller, who gave a concert here in our sanctuary in November, shared one of his worst boyhood fears came from the scenario described in

this very Bible passage. This story and the other gospel stories like it, (as well as Paul's descriptions in his letters) received a lot of attention at his childhood church. Let's face it: on the surface it's a pretty scary story, especially for children, who take things literally. Remember, children don't always ask for an explanation if it seems like all the adults are acting like this is normal. But did you hear? Jesus said two women grinding meal together, and one gets taken and the other is left standing.

Yikes! For young Bobby Jo, he admitted that he spent several years of his childhood terrified that he would be in school, or over at a friend's house, and he would get home and his parents would be gone because they had been swept up in the rapture and he had not. Even taking out the garbage by himself, he would have a quiver of fear that this could be the moment when Jesus had returned and collected his parents—but would be left behind, still on earth, orphaned again. He had been adopted as a baby and so his fear was all the more intense about losing his second set of parents, in the twinkling of an eye.

I don't think Jesus' intention was to scare Bobby Jo, or any little child. That was not it, at all. Jesus comes to embrace, to save, to heal, to call all who will open their hearts to him to join in his redemptive work. The thief in the night metaphor paints a picture of an unexpected intrusion, a break in, perhaps in Christ's case, a break-through. The Noah story touches that knot of dread in the pit of our stomach of having totally missed the boat. Of ignoring and denying warning lights flashing all around us. Both stories are meant to shift us from our typical calendaring, controlling, obsessing mode, into another state of being: A mindful, readiness, that spurs us to action. Now, not later. Clearly Jesus is telling us: There *will* be a too late. Trust God with the wisdom of not telling us when that will be.

You may question why the blue paraments and stole for the season of Advent, why the minor key of most Advent carols, why the black robe, for this "happiest time of the year." These colors help to signal that Advent is the season to go deep, as deep as night, to open our eyes and hearts wider to the suffering and injustice of this world that Jesus came to save. Advent is the season to give pause, not rush. Advent is the season to simplify and streamline: in order to feast our spirits on giving and receiving Divine Love, the presence of Christ in our midst. Advent is a time for shorter lists and longer prayers.

How does that mindful readiness work? It can transform a tire store into a holy moment of grace. A place where we might see Christ, again. A wonderful poem by Stella Nesanovich describes how this happened to her once day. It is titled, "Everyday Grace"

It can happen like that:
meeting at the market,
buying tires amid the smell
of rubber, the grating sound
of jack hammers and drills,
anywhere we share stories,
and grace flows between us.

The tire center waiting room
becomes a healing place
as one speaks of her husband's
heart valve replacement, bedsores
from complications. A man
speaks of multiple surgeries,
notes his false appearance
As strong and healthy.

I share my sister's death
 from breast cancer, her
 youngest only seven.
 A woman rises, gives
 her name, Mrs. Henry,
 then takes my hand.
 Suddenly an ordinary day
 becomes holy ground.ⁱ

And I would say: They saw Christ, in that tire store waiting room. They discovered that by opening their hearts and sharing their pain and suffering, they were not alone. They touched hope.

On this First Sunday of Advent, we are called by Isaiah and by Christ to consider as well our collective responsibility. Christ's call to us as a nation and world, to work for justice and for peace here and everywhere. Isaiah asks us a tough question. Scarier perhaps than the one that Bobby Jo lived with as a child. The prophet Isaiah asks us: What evil systems are we endorsing with our silent complicity? Advent calls us to task, points a finger at us and asks: what are we doing to stop the atrocities in our own land. They are Legion, and we avoid them at our peril. One that is already part of our mission here at FPC is the separation of immigrant children from their parents at the southern border. Regardless of where we may stand on the issue of immigration, I believe that we all agree the separation of children from their parents at the southern border is immoral and a scandal to the Gospel. Look in the eyes of those children who have a real reason to be scared-to-death, and you will see Christ again. Christ calling us to action.

What will you and I do in these next four weeks to extend loving help to those in need? That person could be our spouse, our aging parent, a child in need of a hug, someone who is hungry or homeless, or a group of people who are disenfranchised. It is in the very next chapter, Matthew 25, that Jesus, again in the context of final judgment, plainly tells us that in the hungry, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger, we see Christ.

In October, your session took the step of committing us to be a Matthew 25 church. I think we helped jumpstart our Advent of "Being Ready" last Tuesday night, when 132 people from 10 different faith traditions all living in the Marshfield area, gathered here in our sanctuary, worshipped together, shared the common sign language of kindness, during our Interfaith Service of giving thanks. We welcomed one another across the span of multiple spoken languages, different belief systems and a variety of rituals. We sang together, "Let There Be Peace on Earth, and let it begin with me." And I think I saw Jesus smiling.

Starting today, we have a specific, hands-on tool to help all of us create a Matthew 25 Advent season. It's an advent devotional called "Straw for the Manger." The tradition likely comes from Eastern Europe, perhaps Poland, where children would take a piece of straw and place it in a feeding trough to prepare the bed for baby Jesus. Each piece of straw represented something good that they did, so that by Christmas Eve, Jesus' bed would be prepared with straw symbolizing acts of love and kindness. Don't worry about whether or not you tick off each day of this devotional. The point is to let "Straw in the Manger" help us become more mindful of ways to be Christ to others, adding straws of love and kindness not just to a manger bed, but out into this world. It will give you specific ideas of what you can do to usher into your spirit this Advent, a readiness for the Coming of Christ.

Let's not commit the sin of reversing Jesus' miracle at Cana, where he took plain water and turned it into the finest of wines. If we drain the Matthew 25 spirit of Jesus out of our Advent season, if we fail to see Christ in those who are suffering, or if we fail to let others see Christ through us, we will be doing just that. We will be taking the full-bodied, robust wine, the cup of salvation and watering it down or worse yet—turning it back into water. As we come to the table this day, let us recommit ourselves to being Advent people. That's right: people committed to experiencing the wonder of God made flesh, and dwelling among us. The miracle of Christ who would not stay dead, but was raised from the dead. And who gave us clear marching orders on how to proceed until he returns again.

When will we see you again? It could happen right here at this table. Where we get to touch the bread and swallow the juice. The bread and the juice that aligns our hearts and our vision with Christ. A world where children are not separated from their parents at the border. A world where plants and animals and humans life in balance with one another, cherishing the delicate ecosystem of the world that God so loved.

Eat this bread, Drink this cup. Touch and taste the presence of Christ with us. Let this meal, this feast in a teaspoon, that Jesus has prepared, fortify your spirit. May this meal mobilize us into actions, small and large, that touch others with the miracle of everyday, eternal hope. The gift of Christ for the world. The meal is ready. Are you?

ⁱ Stella Nesanovich, "Everyday Grace," *Healing the Divide: Poems of Kindness and Connection*, edited by James Crews, (Green Writers Press: Brattleboro, Vermont, 2019), p.71.