

Sermon: Advent II

The Rev. Mike Wernick

November 13, 2016

Year C

Malachi 4:1-2a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

I woke up Wednesday morning... wondering how the polls could have been so wrong... and wondering what word of hope would emerge for today... and as I listened to the news... and spoke with colleagues... and prayed... and read scripture... and in silence... listened for the Word of God within... the light of hope emerged... and it became easier to see this... the way God sees this...

When my former wife and I divorced... I asked the court to grant us shared parenting... I didn't think I wanted shared custody... because that meant Rachel would be shuttled back and forth between two homes every other week... and in some ways... would have a less stable life... but I believed that shared parenting was important... so that I could continue... as her father... to shape and form her... but my former wife advocated for me to have as little involvement in Rachel's life as possible... and the judge granted her sole custody...

I was allowed visitation every other weekend... but it felt like the judge's decision removed me totally... excluded me from the equation... silenced my voice... imposed a barrier... between my child and me... and I was devastated... and my former wife did nothing to support my relationship with Rachel... she would not... for example... ever meet me half way between where we each lived to "hand off" Rachel for our weekends together...

But my wise brother Steven... exhorted me... he said: *Michael... a piece of paper from the court is not going to determine the kind of relationship you have with Rachel...* and in the seventeen years since then... his prophecy has proven to be true... over and over again...

In 2008... something else seemed prophetic... seemed to shatter my limited thinking... I was in seminary then... when Barack Obama was elected for the first time... and as many of us gathered in Bexley House... and the results were made final... there was jubilation... and there were tears... as the first African-American man was elected president... it seemed like we had come so far... one of the other students was having some issues with her family... and did not join us... and a day or two later... when I saw her... and asked how she was... things were still not resolved and she seemed unsettled... and I made the mistake of saying... that maybe the results of Tuesday night's election would buoy her spirits... would lessen her load... she paused for a moment... and looked me straight in the eyes... and said: *Why would that be Mike... he wasn't my guy...* I know I took a step back in my head... and I maybe did too in my body... I had assumed wrongly... that someone who was theologically progressive... someone who used story lines from Star Trek in her sermons... and who was welcoming of LGBT people... would be a Democrat... she was not... it's like thinking that someone who's Anglo-Catholic is also theologically conservative... but the two don't necessarily go together...

You may remember that in our August newsletter... there was a piece from The Christian Century which reminded us that religious leaders may not explicitly endorse a candidate... but we are not prohibited from talking about the moral values and social issues that are embedded in political decisions... and *because* in our Episcopal and Lutheran baptismal and ordination liturgies... we vow to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being... we *also* advocate for social justice for all people regardless of religion or faith... and in my vows... I have promised to preach the Gospel...

But there are some people who believe that the Gospel favors them... that God intervenes in things like high school and professional football games... that God enables them to prevail against the opposing team... when I was in the Air Force... I

experienced in attitude... and word... and prayer... a palpable belief among many of my fellow recruits... that we were doing God's work... that we were justified and right... and our adversaries were evil and wrong... that somehow... America's war machine knew better than God's peace...

And just a few days ago... one of my ordained colleagues... shared that he read the Magnificat for meeting devotions... but no one seemed to think it applied to them... that the kids in his confirmation class were observed chanting Donald Trump's name... his teachers have been posting Joel Osteen quotes about how "God's will is done!" The majority of his leadership's FaceBook walls include such things as how immigrants have to go... and one member in his church... seeing these posts from leaders... has discerned she needs to take a break from church... he said he's at a loss...

On Tuesday night... there were those who believed that God was with them in victory... and some who felt abandoned by God... there were those who saw God's hand in this... and those who wondered how God could allow it to happen... but it happened because of the free will that God has given us... but free will can also result in division... and it's easier to justify our division... than it is to do the work of reconciliation... and I believe that God grieves our divisions...

Tuesday's election highlighted... in a startlingly unprecedented... and wholly unexpected way... a deep divide in this country... some that's been fed by racism and xenophobia... some that's been fed by economic injustice... and some that's been fed by the experience that no one even sees you and you don't even exist... the people in Flint probably feel unseen by the federal government... the people in Standing Rock might too... and there are and have been for too long... far too many who have been forgotten and ignored... remember that the African greeting... *Sawu bona*... I see you... also means more... it means... I see your personality... I see your humanity... I see your dignity and respect... and in small African villages... where everyone knows each other... it's a way of connecting... and the response is... *Sikhona*... I am here... when

you see me... you bring me into existence... and until you see me... I do not exist...
and there are... too many people in this country who need to be seen...

The Rev. Michael Spencer... a priest in the Diocese of Eastern Michigan wrote: I'm reminded of the "loyal opposition" which exists in British politics... there is something greater than a President to which we owe our loyalty... and it requires sacrifice for the common good... this message is found in the Christian gospel and in other places... and it calls us to community... the greatest heresy we commit... he wrote... is to believe that we can get anywhere... or accomplish anything... all on our own... we are undeniably interdependent... and we can only do what we do together... facing the light of Christ...

That's partly why we don't have an American flag in this sanctuary... I appreciate... as in *I give thanks for*... the religious freedom we enjoy in this country... but the realm we worship and from which we secure our hope... exists beyond us... beyond this nation... and beyond our political systems... as Romans 8:38 affirms... I am convinced that neither death... nor life... nor angels... nor rulers... nor things present... nor things to come... nor powers... nor height... nor depth... nor anything else in all creation... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord...

When my former wife and I divorced... and the final decree came down... when the binding and legally time-stamped result was irrefutably right in front of me... when it seemed that the daughter I loved had been taken from me... I felt hopeless... but I did not give up on hope... I did not resign myself to the implications which I feared came from that decree... I continued to see and support her... to call her... to advocate for her... sometimes I'd drive ninety miles each way... in one evening... to see her in a school play or concert... and I remained faithful to her... how will we remain faithful to our country...

There will be some... who are not gracious winners... or losers... there have already been protests... and if Hillary had been elected there would still have been protests... but there have been reports around the country of vandalism and violence and shootings against those who voted one way... and against those who voted the other way... and against the marginalized... I have a transgender nephew for whom I am now quite concerned... and the real tragedy in all of this... the deepest way we miss the mark... is that when parents or political parties behave so divisively... it's the children who suffer...

When a marriage ends... some will feel... or be betrayed by former spouses... when an election creates division... there are those who will feel... or be betrayed by relatives or friends... some will be hated because of what they do in Jesus' name... it will feel like dying to some people... and some people may actually die... but by your endurance... the Gospel says... you will gain your souls...

On Wednesday... Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reminded us: *No human candidate can guarantee our life or our future... that is work that God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus... and in baptism we are joined to Christ in that same death and resurrection... so what do we do... dear church... three things... remember that all human beings are created in the image of God... even the ones who didn't vote for your candidate... pray for our country... for those elected... for understanding... and then we get back to work... doing the things the church has always done... welcome the stranger... feed the hungry... clothe the naked... visit the sick and those in prison... work for justice and peace in all the earth... all in the name of the one who is our hope... our life... and our peace... Jesus... who has set us free to serve the neighbor...*

Yesterday... The Rev. Barbara Crafton wrote: *We cannot designate our fellow Americans as enemies. We can be opponents, but we must not be enemies. We can be passionate, but we must not hate.*

We can contend for what we think best... but in order to do that, we must stay in contention. If we foreclose on relationship, we are no longer in the civic conversation. The opposition's decision at the beginning of the current administration to oppose everything the president wanted to do was such a foreclosure... and it was a civic disaster... for the other side to do that now -- tit for tat... eye for eye... tooth for tooth... might feel symmetrically satisfying... but it would further cement our grievous division and leave us in a worse state than we are in now...

Barbara continued: I have prayed for every American president since I became a praying adult... I long ago gave up ordering God around in prayer... I don't really pray for things... I just pray... wordlessly directing the energy of my longing or my fear toward its object... it is enough... for it is unlikely that my view of what is possible exhausts God's repertoire of possibility...

"Not my president?" But he is... until he is not... he may be the president with whom you disagree... whose worldview you reject... but he will be what we have... and we must deal with him... it will not be easy... but we cannot leave the room... Gandhi's "be the change you want to see" is anything but a lazy way out of conflict... it is hard... but it is the only way...

The lesson I learned in 2008 taught me that we must... all of us... of any political party... continue to seek relationship and accountability... continue to be in community and conversation... and refrain from making assumptions... because beyond any political label... we are all God's children... and although we are called to something beyond what we know here and now... we are capable of embodying so much more of it... in the here and now... than we may believe possible... Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is here... we just need eyes to see it... this is the Advent Hope we have... this is the Advent Hope that we hold on to... this is the Advent Hope that we continue to work towards...

I close with a prayer written... perhaps this week... by Fr. Richard Rohr... let us pray...

All vulnerable and merciful God,

We do not know what is ours to do.

We feel scared and alone today.

We are tired of taking sides.

We cannot hold any more fear or anger or rejection.

And yet we know so many of our friends feel unheard and unwanted.

Help us trust that no feeling is final,

And that YOU will have the full and final word.

If You are indeed a Suffering God, may we hold this suffering with You for those who voted for Hillary Clinton, for those who voted for President-elect Donald Trump, and for the many who have felt excluded by our politics in the many ways that we do indeed exclude.

We offer ourselves as best we can to hold this Love outward and open toward all, just as You never cease to do toward us.

And we believe that You are praying this prayer through us. Amen.

Mike+