

# Sermon: Advent 4

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November 27, 2016

Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Our seven week season of Advent continues with a song... with a Song of Isaiah... according to our *lectionary*... the lyrics are scripture's *first* words to the church in a new year... but all year long... they sing of hope... of nations streaming to God's mountain... of a willingness to be instructed... of making peace with each other... and the part that I think catches our attention... and may catch us off guard... is that there's a willingness to allow God to arbitrate... to allow God to judge... and I think it catches our attention... because we live in a world of too much judgment... of too many who rush to judgment... who jump to conclusions... and it recently occurred to me... that jumping to conclusions without enough information... is like bungee jumping... without the bungee...

Paul Simpson Duke... Co-Pastor of First Baptist Church at the University of Michigan... writes... *God... in other words... will not only speak... but will listen... as we listened to each other last week... God will speak but will also listen... to the grievances... disputes... and concerns of the nations... and will adjudicate... arbitration and judgment... are the only active verbs assigned by the text to God... the nations and peoples are about to make peace... but the gift given by God is justice... the end of inequity is the basis for the ending of violence... and the old assertion is true... there is no lasting peace without justice...*

But the promise of justice strikes chords of dissonance when we look around us... we don't think of justice as setting things right... too often we tend to think of it more like vengeance... and we certainly don't deserve vengeance...

And the promise of a world in which the world's leaders cooperate... and defer to God instead of themselves... and accept God's judgment... and beat swords into

plowshares... has us asking the question that Mary asked in Luke 1:34... *How can this be?*

There have been many times in my life... when my myopic vision... when my assumptions... when my selfish desires... when my prejudices... when my brokenness... kept me from seeing what was possible... there have been times in my life... when... what seemed impossible... when... what I told myself couldn't possibly happen... when I couldn't see a way forward... didn't mean that God couldn't see a way forward... my ordination is a testament to that... and there have been some pretty significant forks in the road of my life... because I was able to *Let Go and Let God*... because I took a leap of faith... because I came to believe that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity... because I was willing to have my eyes opened up to something that may have scared the hell out of me... but that I believed was also God's will for me... because I was willing to smell the coffee... to learn... however imperfectly... to interpret not only the appearance of the sky... but the signs of the times... and to wake up to more of what was going on around me...

In today's Gospel... Jesus exhorts his listeners to keep awake... in Mark 13:37 you'll remember a similar story about the man who goes on a journey and puts his slaves in charge... and commands his doorkeeper to be on the watch... and reminds them that they don't know when the master of the house will come home... and Jesus tells them twice... to... **Keep Awake!**

But in our sleepiness... we tend to think that the world works... the way we work... we tend to think that what's normal for us... should be normal for everyone else... we tend to think that others value what we value... but that's not always true... as a friend of mine once said to her sister... I love you so much... that what's important to you... is half as important to me...

Two weeks ago I quoted Barbara Crafton... who said we must remain in contention with each other... in dialogue with each other... the prefix "con" means... together... and the second half means *intent observation*... but I wonder if what people hear... is the word tension... as in conflict... and we dislike conflict... but the first definition of contention in the Oxford English Dictionary is: *the action of straining or striving earnestly*... and if we remember Oscar Wilde's play... The Importance of Being Earnest... well... there's a more positive image in being earnest... isn't there...

But collectively... as a nation... and around the world... some of us are like two year olds... still in the process of differentiating from our parents... and some of us are like teenagers... asserting ourselves... digging our heels in... just because we can... but we have not yet tipped the scales at becoming godly parents... having an awareness that lets us consider all our children... seeing the big picture... seeing the needs and desires of the whole human family... and sometimes making sacrifices so we can achieve the best for the greatest number of people...

And even when we understand... that our idea of normal doesn't dictate what's normative... it can be SO difficult to know what questions to ask... what assumptions to put aside... it can be difficult to know how to let go of those things that keep us locked in as spiritual two year olds... or teenagers... but that's what we are called to do... if God became human so that we might become more divine... then God is constantly contending with us... is striving earnestly with us... as Jacob did with the angel... to let go of those things which keep us from increasing boundlessness... and to be renamed as Israel... which means one who contends with God...

It's hard enough to do this in one's own family of origin... it gets more complicated in a church community... and across a nation... because some things are not as we think they are... not as we want them to be... or believe they ought to be... although the Voting Rights Act was signed into law in 1965... and was aimed at overcoming the legal barriers which prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote under the

15th Amendment... on June 25, 2013... the Supreme Court effectively struck down the heart of that Act... and freed nine states... mostly in the South... to change their election laws without advance federal approval... when President Obama was first elected... when there was a black man in the White House... when that particular glass ceiling had been broken... one Episcopal diocese questioned whether they needed to offer anti-racism training any more... yes... they did... there's still deep racism in this country... and even though the highest court in this country discerned that marriage equality ought to be the law of the land... acts of violence still continue against LGBT people...

But one thing that encourages me after this month's election... is that we see more clearly where things are... and although we may be disappointed that there is still so much division in this country... we can still continue to measure our speech... and our behavior... and our hearts... against the guideposts of the Gospel... and against our baptismal vows... in which we promised to strive for justice and peace among all people... and respect the dignity of every human being...

Lutheran pastor Ray McKechnie wrote... today's readings begin with the promise of the *parousia*... the second Advent... in which "no one knows the day or hour" of Christ's coming... not even him... and yet... somehow the future collapses in on our present... and Christ continually comes to us... and theologian Ted Peters wrote... just as in Christ himself... so also in the Eucharist... the future arrives ahead of time... but is not exhausted... is not used up upon its arrival... it is the humble presence... of the yet to be consummated fulfillment of all things in their ultimate glory... so as we begin a more traditional Advent today... now that night is gone... and day is near... let's ask ourselves... how has Christ come to us unexpectedly... how are we beating our swords into ploughshares... and our spears into pruning-hooks... how has Christ come to us... are we still waiting... and if not... what are we waiting for...

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