

Sermon: Advent 4

The Rev. Mike Wernick

November 29, 2015

Year C

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

It's officially Advent... we're finally more in sync with the rest of Christendom... but we're not reassuringly closer to the infant Jesus... to shepherds... to angels... and star light... instead... the grown up Jesus is making what seem like scary and dire predictions... but I believe... they only seem scary when collectively... when more collectively than individually... we're not aligned with God's will for us...

Pastor Kathy Beach-Verhey writes about this passage: *Despite some frightening images... the Advent text from Luke offers not fear and damnation... but hope and expectation... God in Christ is coming because God loves us... because God wants to redeem us... in the midst of the fearful specter... Jesus calls us to stand up... and raise our heads... because our redemption is drawing near...*

I know many of us here... and most Christians around the world I think... wish God would hurry up and just get it over with already... the anticipation is killing us... both figuratively... and literally... but I've learned in my own life... that the anticipation of a thing... the fear of a thing... is almost always far worse than the thing itself... and the fear of the Other... is almost always far worse than the person themselves... but even when we know that... we want to remain in control so we can maintain our protective boundaries... but even then... we're still afraid...

My parents live in a gated community... in south Florida... there are many such places... and many of them are middle class places... nothing special really... not the places of Architectural Digest... and as I've driven around Florida... I've noticed that many of the gate houses are often empty... vacant... there is no one standing guard... one wonders why they bother... one wonders if it's just for show and nothing more...

There are other gated communities which *are* out of the pages of Architectural Digest... and these are the places whose gate houses really are staffed 24 / 7... and they seem more like well-outfitted military gate houses... intended to filter out enemies... all who don't belong... and allow access only to those who live there... or who have verifiable business with those who live there... they're exclusive communities... often with higher walls... designed to provide a higher level of security for those who live there...

But it seems to me that these walls... and the walls being proposed by some in the current election cycle... it seems to me that the prohibitions being proposed by the nation's governors against accepting refugees... and on November 19 this was more than half of them... it seems to me that the bravado being expressed so openly... is empty... comes out of fear... and it's smoke and mirrors... designed to appeal to the electorate's base...

And as I said last week... when I quoted Chris Glaser... terrorism of any kind must be confronted... and this kind of terrorism will require more than diplomacy... but we should never equate the "more" with the will of God... and we should never equate walls which create boundaries... with the unbounded inclusion and love of God in Christ...

Walls like these are touted because they're tangible... they're easier to construct than long lasting solutions... walls like these are promoted... because they're easier to build than the bridges which connect people... but they're also like band-aids... they cover the wound without really healing it... and sometimes the wound worsens... because walls divide... walls make some people winners and some people losers... walls keep justice out... and one reason that evil is so angry... is because it feels excluded and is made to be *less than*...

But the truth is more mind-boggling than we can imagine... walls cannot heal hurt... and cannot keep hatred out... like water seeping into a place you'd really prefer it stay out... hatred will find a way in...

Pastor Wesley Avram wrote: *the reality is this... anything can happen at any moment... and in one way or another everything is happening in every moment... there is no present moment to which we can cling... and change is not limited by predictability and control... even as we participate in our happiness... even as there are indefinable connections between how we live and what we live... these connections are never exact... there are other realities at work that sometimes overwhelm... realities of brokenness and evil... and of serendipity and grace... and so the present moment is itself an event for us... worth loving and worth living... because it is a gift... one can only accept it with thanksgiving... trust the promise that lies behind it... and pray for the strength to do what is necessary to fill it with faithfulness... waiting for God...*

As I wait for the crazy mixed-up misguided cancer cells on my chest to be removed... I experience some anxiety and some anticipation... but it is more about the anticipation of *can't we hurry up and just get it over with already...* there is though the confidence that God is present... there is also the understanding that God works through the skill of surgeons... and the technology of science... and the omnipresent impulses for healing... but my confidence extends to whatever outcome presents itself... unlike the barrage of seasonal TV commercials... that tell me all the things I deserve... I'm not quite sure what I deserve and what I don't... but I am thankful for who I am and what I have... and for the circumstances which continue to form me...

After the attacks in Paris... Presiding Bp. Curry wrote: *Often in the gospels... fear grips the people of God... and time and again... either the angels... or Jesus himself... respond with the same words of comfort: "Be not afraid." But Jesus calls us to go even further... not just to love our neighbors and our kin... but to love our enemies. This is particularly difficult when we are afraid. But even in the midst of our fear we stand on the solid ground of our faith and proclaim our faith in Christ crucified and risen from the dead. In practical terms... this may mean finding strength in prayer... or in our neighbors... or in our churches... or in acts of solidarity with others who live in fear. This is the hope that casts out fear. Our resurrection hope is larger than our fear... let*

nothing keep us from that hope... that faith... that security in God's dream for all of humanity...

I believe it's impossible to be afraid when we are grounded in the immovable and eternal love of God that is both beyond us and here now... this is being in the world... but not of it... and when we live this life... we function as a conduit for that love... bringing it into the moveable and transitory world that surrounds us... and offering up God's grace and healing...

We may sometimes need our faith to be restored... we may sometimes be weighed down by the worries of this life... because we can be fooled by the empty promises of unmanned guard houses and high walls... and like Peter... James... John... and Andrew... we may want to know the moment when these things will be accomplished... so we can be... or just feel ready... but they have already been accomplished... like the disciples... we may want to know when they'll happen so we can feel prepared... but Jesus has already done what is needed and has prepared the way for us... Be not afraid... and for that we say... Thanks be to God...

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