

“Are You Ready?” by Gayle Fisher-Stewart

November 27, 2016

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of Church of the Saviour



First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

Good morning, Church!

I bring you greetings from Calvary Episcopal Church where I serve as associate pastor and I thank Sandra Miller, my new BFF, for the kind invitation to come and bring a word from the Lord.

And, so, on this first Sunday of Advent, I need to ask a question. “Did the Church forget to send the memo that this is Advent or did the world receive it and hit “delete”? Not talking about the truly secular Christmas folks; but those who follow the crucified and risen Lord; who have a liturgical year.

Folks are in stores buying Christmas gifts; many could not wait to finish Thanksgiving dinner. Even before Thanksgiving, Christmas decorations were up. The North Pole seems to find its way South, East, and West earlier and earlier each year. Christmas is coming! It might be the day some of us celebrate the birth of Jesus, but as each year passes, it’s getting more and more difficult to tell.

This is a time of preparation, a time of anticipation, and if we look at the lectionary readings for the 1st Sunday of Advent for all three years, they have nothing to do with the birth of Christ. We don't come close to what many of us grew up with – something that resembles the manger scene until the 4th Sunday of Advent.

But where is my Christmas of my youth; where are my little drummer boys; where are the chestnuts roasting on an open fire; why shouldn't I be singing "Silent Night?" After all, we are gearing up to celebrate the day Christ is born – as if it happens all over again – or are we? I've heard people talking about Advent as waiting in anticipation of the birth of Christ? I even learned that in church a long time ago.

But in reality, we are not waiting for a Nicodemus experience. We're not waiting, preparing for Jesus to be born all over again. On December 25 – of course, we know that is not the day; Jesus is not re-born. It is no different than on Good Friday, he is not crucified all over again, or Easter morning; he is not raised all over again. That happened in the past – 2,000 years ago. Those events don't happen again year after year after year.

So, in the words of Marvin Gaye, what's going on? In this season of Advent – anticipation – of Christ's coming – while all too much of the world is rushing toward Christmas morning where somehow the presents being opened under the tree are related to either the gift of God or God's self to the world or the presents the wise men brought to the baby Jesus, we find ourselves, this morning, focusing on the end – the end times when Christ comes again; when Jesus comes back – and that is something new, something different, because that has not yet occurred. He has not come back – yet. And, until he does, every year we can focus on that; we can focus on that last Advent.

So, we begin this Sunday with the end in mind – with the end times, the eschaton, with apocalyptic visions in mind. But this end times can be scary stuff. The Gospel of Matthew provides some interesting images – that we probably should not take literally, at least two of them – but that get us thinking. Everyone was going about their business until the flood came and took out everyone with the exception of Noah and his family. Then there is

the image of folks going about their daily business working or preparing food and one is taken up and the other is left behind. And some of us might be wondering which one would I be – the one taken up or the one left behind? Or in this season where people are traveling, their homes are left, presumably unguarded because the thief comes and takes everything. That will make you check the security system a couple of times before you leave on that trip. Perhaps this is why we're out shopping – skipping straight to Christmas – because who wants to deal with this in this season that is supposed to be happy; that is supposed to be fun? Advent is not for the feint-hearted.

What these images really invoke is that this is the season of urgency and watchfulness; that Christ might just show up any minute, any second and would we be ready? And if he came, right now –what would Jesus find? There is not going to be a 2 minute warning. This is the season that really prepares us for all the other seasons; that we need to make sure that we are ready for anytime Christ might show up; that we are not capable of reading any possible signs; that we need to be about the business of the mission of Jesus.

And there is not a day that I don't pass by this church with its words of "Justice and Inclusion" on the front, with the word "Seekers" that not only are people welcome who are seeking to know the Word, but who are seeking to be about the mission of Christ, so that when Jesus comes, you will be ready, you will be found alert, awake, and ready; that you won't be cowering like Adam and Eve when they knew they had messed up and were hiding from God. It will not be an "uh-oh" moment when Jesus comes.

But in the meantime, just like Noah, we should also be about the business of creating arks of safety for those who find themselves vulnerable by the actions of others who do not see Christ in others. Our churches should truly be sanctuaries for all who need them. We should also be about the business of making sure that we are able to confront the false prophets who are quick to say that we're scaring folks for no reason with all this end-times stuff. That this is all there is – so eat, drink, and be merry! We're also called to be on the lookout for God and God's goodness to break into our world any moment where the world will be united with God – where God's peace and justice reign, when the beloved community is finally and totally realized. Rev. 3:20 – "Listen! I am sanding at the door knocking. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with

me.”

As we do what we are called to do, we look for those moments when we see glimpses of that kingdom. Wherever justice breaks out unexpectedly, whenever we open that door, God is in our midst. The God who took on human form, became human, became like us, walks in our midst. On FB, there was a story of a hate crime in a small town. While a black family was out of town, someone painted racist graffiti on their home and truck. The police – 1 police officer – the chief – notified them of what had occurred and then the town – predominantly white – came together and decided that their neighbors could not come back home to see what hate had wrought. So everyone, to include the mayor and the police chief, came together to wash, and scrub away the hate. When they realized that the paint on the house could not be scrubbed away, they re-painted the entire house. They were determined that hate would not win.

We see glimpses of the kingdom; glimpses of Christ’s coming – glimpses of that last Advent – when we shall be redeemed – when an Episcopal priest is invited to worship and preach at the Seeker’s Church; whenever people break their doctrinal – their religious – dividing lines to worship the same God.

As we prepare for the second coming of Christ, this is also a time of remembering. Yes, we can remember the birth of Christ that happened long ago; the Christ child born in a manger, to refugee parents, marginalized people, colonized people. A child who so threatened the governmental status quo that he was marked for death as a baby. How many children are viewed as a threat to the status quo of this country? How many would be marked for death if sent back; if their parents are sent back to the countries from which they fled. How many children die for lack of a home, food, health care? Yes, we can remember and that remembrance is what theologian Bruce Morrill calls “dangerous amnesia.”

Amnesia is forgetting; amnesia is remembering. Yes, Jesus is knocking at the door, when we remember the circumstances under which Jesus was born; how he was marked for death; when we remember his mission to the outcast, the marginalized; when we remember how he challenged the religious and political authorities and how he, himself, was marked for death and death carried out

under the most inhumane and unjust circumstances. When we remember as we receive communion, and hear the words, "Do this in remembrance of me." As we remember, whenever we break bread – anywhere; whenever we raise a glass to our lips – yes, we remember Christ's life and then we are propelled to follow him; to do as he did and that doing lets everyone see what the kingdom of God is like. The remembrance is dangerous because remembrance turned into action can get you into trouble; but Jesus found himself in trouble, so we're in good company. And so we remember, it is more than a mental remembering. We remember him with our bodies put into action to bring the kingdom of God just a little bit closer.

Advent – preparing for the coming of Christ – to assess how we have lived our lives; whether or not we have taken up his cross, whether or not we have followed him; whether or not we have fed his sheep, whether or not we have loved one another as ourselves. Advent, a period of introspection and preparation so we are ready whenever Christ comes. By how we live our lives, we remain alert. By how we live our lives, we remain awake. When Christ comes, it will be a surprise, but it won't be a shock. We won't be rushing around trying to figure out how to get right with the Lord, whether or not we should open the door. We are not like the disciples. We know the story; they did not. We're hard on the disciples because they don't get it; but they didn't know how the story ends, we do. When Jesus is speaking to them in the gospel, he had not been crucified and he certainly had not been raised. And while we don't know "in what part of the night the [Christ] is coming," we do know he is coming. "Therefore, you also must be ready."

But that doesn't mean we have to do everything; we can't do everything. We are not humanly able to do everything that needs to be done for God's people and God's creation, but if we do what we can, if we commit to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives in the spirit of hope and trust, when Jesus comes, that will be enough. And so, we begin this season of Advent with the end in mind. Are you ready? Amen.