

# “Getting Ready for Incarnation” by Peter Bankson

## SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Luke 21:25-36

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

## INTRODUCTION

This year our Advent theme is an invitation to celebrate not just the birth of Baby Jesus, but the incarnation of the Creator. Our reflection paragraph says it this way:

Perhaps the hardest thing to remember about Christmas is this. It celebrates the incarnation, not just the nativity. The incarnation is an on-going process of salvation, while the nativity is the once-for-all-historical event of Bethlehem. We do not really celebrate Christ’s ‘birthday,’ remembering something that happened long ago. We celebrate the stupendous fact of the incarnation, God entering our world so thoroughly that nothing has been the same since.

What will it take for us to recognize, claim and live more fully into the reality that God, the Creator, is alive and present in every rock and bone, in every drop of water and the blood of every living part of this reality?

What can we do to get ready, in these troubled times, for the deeper revelation that every thought and thing is part of the Creator?

As we look at the dismaying depth of trouble all around us, it makes me wonder: Are WE in trouble, or just everybody else?

Two weeks ago, Pat shared his conclusion that we are. He said:

I think Seekers is in spiritual trouble. The clue that leads me to this assessment is the current conversation about evangelism in response to fear about the aging of Seekers. Fear may be justified, but the challenge of aging members is a misleading focus. We might better focus on the reality that respect for Christianity is plummeting in the United States for excellent reasons. Both news media and entertainment media seldom present good images of Christianity or of Christian leaders. ... What is at stake is far more fundamental than retuning our documents, or memorizing better slogans and elevator speeches. Be afraid of being a small island when troubled seas are rising. ...

Pat closed with this challenge: "What mistakes is Seekers making because of its strengths?"

I confess that this Word from Pat was hard for me to hear... at first. But as I've worked with it, one thing that has become a bit clearer for me is this: If Christianity is becoming more and more of a minority, and if Seekers Church is, as it has long been, a minority within American Christianity, then we might take some lessons about our place in this time from the experiences of other minority communities who have learned to live in this time and place, working for peace and justice from within a dismissive, intolerant system.

This idea, that we really are a minority, led me into a cloudy valley of guilt and grievance:

- • Guilt for the reality that I'm a very visible part of the dwindling dominant majority, whether I like it or not.
- • Grievance over my apparent inability to learn how to deal constructively with the guilt I feel.

Is it enough to try harder to understand and alleviate the problems of others? How can I learn to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all," as Paul urges the church in Thessalonica in our Epistle lesson for this week?

That cloudy valley of guilt and grievance is for me a place of strategic confusion, a place where I know that I don't know. It's a place where I've convinced myself that my instincts won't lead me in the right direction. For me, as for many of us, those are often places of disregard or denial. I felt my feet stumbling on that

familiar rocky road. And as I thought about the commitment I'd made to be here now, offering you "the Word as I have heard it," I was not enthusiastic. I wanted to share about getting ready to celebrate the wonderful reality of the incarnation of God "in us, and around us, and through us," and here I was, stuck in the valley of the shadow of confusion.

The week after listening to Pat's sermon I entered into a reflective place. I was aware of a heavy undercurrent of not knowing. Then came last Sunday, and our unexpected time of worship. Somehow, the musical celebration Jesse orchestrated sounded a trumpet call of hope through my strategic fog. His conversion of our prayer of commitment into a chant drew my attention to the part about confession and forgiveness:

Forgive us for the hurt we have inflicted,  
and help us forgive those who have hurt us.

We've offered that prayer regularly since Dave Lloyd urged us to add it to the prayer based on our commitment statement. But I confess that in some ways it's a challenge for me. It's a challenge for me to recognize, let alone confess, when I have hurt another. I try hard to do what's right, and usually feel pretty good about what happens. But I really don't take criticism very well. And it's even harder for me to acknowledge the way others have hurt me. My standard approach is to let the critic sitting on my right shoulder tell me, "Peter, You're big and strong (and healthy and pretty well-off.) Get over it." So my response to Jesse's sermon was an opportunity for some deeper reflection and insight.

As love would have it, shortly after worship last Sunday an epiphany emerged from my life here in community. I'm taking Dave Lloyd's class in the School of Christian Living, where we're looking at Paul's letters to the scattered churches. We've been focusing on some of the reasons why Paul might have written as he did to particular communities, given what he knew about the dynamics of their life together.

Last Tuesday we spent some good, deep sharing time on the challenges of confession and forgiveness. The sense I got from that conversation is that while we in Seekers Church see ourselves as a forgiving people – "Creative, Inclusive; Working for Peace and Justice"– we don't have very well-developed practices for confession and forgiveness within the community. That rang sharp and true for me.

And I know, from conversations over dinner before classes at the School, that Keith's Difficult Conversations class has been on a parallel course. We seem to be looking for new ways to foster peace AND justice, ways that are more authentic AND inclusive, welcoming the loving, and often unexpected, presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

I wondered how the sharp tone of the truth we shared in the library that night might be opening my ears to something new. That conversation helped give me find the courage to step into what feels like a vulnerable place, to share an emerging idea that just might resonate with you as we head into this Advent season.

We need to deal with the reality that as a tiny, inclusive, non-denominational, creative Christian Church working for peace and justice, we are a minority people. As a minority people God calls us to tune ourselves up in the "Key of Compassion" and Sing 'til the power of the Lord comes down.

I don't see the change we're facing as a big change in WHO we are. But it does feel like a sizable change in HOW we are ... with one another. Somehow, we'll need to deepen the already deep trust among many of us to the point where we can take our confession and forgiveness to a deeper level.

This might pose a huge challenge for us because each of us may well see ourselves in a different place. After all, isn't each of us unique?

But I think that if some of us begin a more conscious practice of forgiveness, we'll notice the difference and find it easier to tune in. I noticed that last Sunday. Once someone started to move to the music, others joined in, hesitant at first, but with increasing energy as the Spirit moved through us.

Here's the idea:

- • Let's recognize our resistance to change.
- • Then we can retune our resonance to the "Key of Compassion" and develop some practical methods for forgiveness.
- • As we wake up to a new sense of identity we can celebrate the harmony of God's immanent incarnation with each other and around the world.

Our Advent theme this year is Getting Ready. The bulletin cover offers a different sort of Advent calendar, one with what I might call "seeds of hope" for each day between now and Christmas. I wonder how we might use it as part of an Advent practice of getting ready for God with Us.

The images from last Sunday were strong: Jesse invited us to sing and dance and give ourselves to the rhythm and harmony of new tunes. That suggested a fresh way for me to think about getting ready for the incarnation of the Holy One throughout all Creation. But ... a music metaphor? From me? At least I know my limitations when it comes to music. But, since I'm no musician, I thought that it might be easier for me to admit my shortcomings in a place like this. So if it works at all, I'll count on you to make it better.

I'd like to look at three phases in this process of getting ready for change:

- • Recognize our resistance
- • Retune our resonance
- • Sing and Rejoice

### RECOGNIZE OUR RESISTANCE

The world is in a mess. Global climate-change threats and fear-based terrorism consume our attention. The national political turmoil and fear-based discrimination engage or repel us, often diverting us from looking for solutions to bigger problems. Community tensions over our future are challenging the quiet sense of our identity. Our lessons for the week point to earlier times like these.

We're called to recognize we're out of tune. And, we need to acknowledge our resistance to change.

29 <b>Courage</b>	30 <b>Serenity</b>	1 <b>Hospitality</b>	2 <b>Forgiveness</b>	3 <b>Empathy</b>	4 <b>Service</b>	5 <b>Community</b>
6 <b>Justice</b>	7 <b>Gladness</b>	8 <b>Power</b>	9 <b>Kindness</b>	10 <b>Compassion</b>	11 <b>Wholeness</b>	12 <b>Healing</b>
13 <b>Mercy</b>	14 <b>Wisdom</b>	15 <b>Caring</b>	16 <b>Fun</b>	17 <b>Growth</b>	18 <b>Grace</b>	19 <b>Truth</b>
20 <b>Hope</b>	21 <b>Love</b>	22 <b>Joy</b>	23 <b>Peace on Earth</b>	24 <b>Goodwill to All</b>	25 <b>God With Us</b>	

Here's a PRACTICE that might help us;

1. 1. Pick the phrase of the day. (Courage is the word for today.)

2. 2. Ask yourself:

Where do I feel it missing within me?

Where am I hanging on for dear life?

What's keeping me from singing out the Good News?

1. 3. Choose some part for further focus

2. 4. Reflect in your journal

3. 5. Share with another Seeker, like your spiritual companion. (And if you lack a spiritual companion and want one, let a Steward know.)

Taken together, I think a month of this might help us recognize our resistance

The second phase would be to

### **RETUNE OUR RESONANCE**

Who do you resonate with? How can you hear the Good News (Life in the "Key of Compassion")? If God is Love, and God is in us and around us, how do we embody that love? What's holding you back?

As I said earlier, I'm not a string musician. But I do have an old banjo that I inherited from my father. It hasn't been tuned for so long that one of the tuning pegs is stuck. If you wanted to make music together with that banjo you'd need to play in whatever key that string can play. Sometimes I'm like that: stuck in one key. That's when I feel that deep sense of assurance that shouts "I know what's right. If you want to be with me, get in tune with my thinking...!"

When it comes to finding harmony, whose stuck string is defining the key? And what if it's not the Key of Compassion? What's holding us back, and how can we find the companionship to unstick those frozen pegs?

Here's where confession and forgiveness can help loosen us up so the Spirit can get in to help us re-tune.

Here's another PRACTICE:

1. 1. Give the phrase of the day, can you hear the "Key of Compassion?"

2. 2. Who is sounding that note of hope?

3. 3. Where have you seen today's seed of hope on the edge of the chaos?

4. 4. Can you re-tune yourself, or if not, who can help?

What stands in the way?

What do you need to confess to free yourself for change?

What do you need to forgive ... in another, or in yourself\]

## 1. 5. Many sources

From 12-step practices,  
Or difficult conversations (looking for the  
“third story”,)  
Or books like Recovery: The Twelve Steps as  
Spiritual Practice  
Admitting our wrongs to God: the  
Silent Scream  
Find a quiet, private  
place  
Settle in and assure  
yourself that you’re alone and safe  
Share in prayer as you  
would with your best friend  
Ask God to sustain you  
as you delve into the madness of your life  
Tell your story about  
the wrong you have committed  
Retell your story from  
the perspective of those you have hurt  
Shout out, in silence or  
aloud, to offer up the depth of your feelings  
When this has settled within, share the  
experience with a spiritual companion

### 1. One big issue is: Can you ask for help when you need it?

There are lots of paths. The challenge is to follow one of them.

The third phase is to

#### **REJOICE**

We can claim our place as a minority community. Jesus was at his peak on the cross, forgiving those who crucified him. What does that look like for us as a community ... for me as an individual? And, am I ready for that kind of peak performance?

We can celebrate the good news that we are not alone. There are other communities who are singing out in the key of compassion. There are others here with you, who love you as you are. Thank God we’re in this together.

Get ready for surprises: God revealed EVERYWHERE! Focus each day on the Advent

feeling for the day. Ask yourself, "How does it encourage me to re-tune in the Key of Compassion?"

#### PRACTICE

1. Share the Good news of the day with another: your spiritual companion, someone in Seekers, a trusted friend.
2. Find someone who is NOT in our community.
  1. Share the word of the day in a positive way.
  2. Encourage them in their journey.

Like dancing in worship last Sunday, each choice we make to sing out in the key of compassion will encourage others to do the same.

#### CLOSING

So, what can I offer us as we head into this season of Advent, waiting for the coming of Christ into the world (again)? One key idea is that we are in a time of transition, a time when we can choose to "hang tight," and cling in fear to what we've convinced ourselves is "right." Or, we can choose to be open to the leading of the Spirit along fresh paths.

If we choose to open ourselves to what is new – new beyond us, new among us, new within us – then we will be at the mercy of the Holy Spirit, which is beyond our control. That sense of being out of control will be painful for many of us, and we'll need to stand ready to offer our supportive presence to those who've felt left out of the process.

As we consider this Advent season, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, I invite us each to quietly acknowledge that here at Seekers Church we are part of the Body of Christ in ever new and challenging ways. One element of that challenge is for us, as individuals and as a faith community to discern how we will respond to the cry for peace and justice.

How do you respond when someone asks you "What do you (and your Church) do to foster justice and be in solidarity with those in need?"

How can we let people know that, in spite of the fact that we are a minority entity in the cultural struggle over the role of Church in society, we've cast our lot with Jesus?

And, as we look at today at our Advent journey, I ask you, "Where do you find the courage to move ahead in claiming the Good News of confession and forgiveness. And, what can we offer to support larger / deeper / broader reconciliation.

As we enter Advent this year, how might we prepare ourselves for what already is:



the presence of the Creator in all of Creation? Here's the idea: Recognize our resistance; Retune our resonance; and Sing and Rejoice!

Last night, as Marjory and I were reflecting on our worship here last Sunday, she said how wonderful it would be to be part of a women's barbershop quartet at Seekers. That sounded to me like harmonizing in the key of compassion!

AaaaaMENnnnnnnn! (A loud chant by all, leading quickly to harmony)