

Marjory Zoet Bankson: What Are We Waiting For?

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

by Marjory Zoet Bankson

What Are We Waiting For?

Advent 1 Text

Luke [21:25-36](#)

25 years ago this fall, Emily sent me to a clown class as part of my preparation for membership in Seekers. She thought that I needed to learn how to laugh at myself...and indeed, I did. I still do.

Clowning captivated my life then, but before that, it frightened me severely. One of the assignments was to put on whiteface every day, gaze in the mirror at myself and then to journal about my response. I did it only once...and had a nightmare that I was dying by my own hand. I told Emily, who was my sponsor into Stewards, that I could not do it – I would have to be a clown dropout.

She wisely did not press the issue, so I was freed to go back to the clown class and with the support of the others who seemed so much clearer about the kind of clowns they wanted to be. I went into whiteface (which symbolizes death to the ego self) and then into color...claiming the “inner clown” that was

waiting to come out.

Nevertheless, I failed that round too, because my first clown was not a true one. She was more the construct of an assignment. The class was ending and I needed a character, so I grabbed at the bumbling servant just beneath my conscious mind, dressed her in draggy clothes and covered my hair with a hat. She did not even have a name.

After our first appearance, I felt sad and dejected, not playfully inept. Peter said my clown "looked pitiful," so I dropped her clothes in a bag and chalked up the whole experience to learning about my limits ... but clowning was not through with me!

First, a name came in a dream: FRIEDA. It comes from the root word for "freedom," and I could feel the breath of Spirit in her presence. When I wrote a dialogue with Frieda in my journal, she demanded a red wig from Al's magic shop and knew exactly what she wanted to wear and do. Her voice was clear and raucous, and I knew then that clowning was bigger than my serious little ego. She would take me where I did not much want to go, but I was approaching my 40th birthday and it was a time when everything seemed to be breaking open. Frieda midwifed my mid-life crisis!

For a couple of years, my clown traveled everywhere in the trunk of my car, ready for an adventure. As more Seekers became clowns, we joined the "Hands across America" demonstration and passed out candy to late-night tax mailers on April 15. Peter and I brushed off the brass of navy

chaplains at their 200th birthday celebration and blew bubbles for children on the oncology ward at Bethesda Naval Hospital. We clowned the Gospel during Advent for Seekers and did the passion story during Lent for an African American church on Capitol Hill.

I got to know Frieda better each time she appeared, but I learned to respect the otherness of her energies too. Once in whiteface and costume, she operates on pure feeling without the constraints of my ego-self. She feels dangerous and exciting, creative and conniving. Now I would say that going into clown constellates the Clown archetype...sad, funny, shocking, vulnerable.

St Paul writes about early Christians being “fools for Christ,” confounding the so-called wisdom of the world. The fool has no proper home, no status, no money, no manners. Instead, the clown loves with lavish inclusiveness, thrives in chaos and color, lets imagination loose in the world. The clown is all feeling. She is the natural child caught in grown-up situations – everybody and nobody at the same time.

Archetypally, the Clown is the polar opposite of the King, speaking truth to power, poking fun at pompous airs and pointless rules. In medieval times, the yearly “Feast of Fools” lampooned the pope and hierarchy of the church with earthy humor, reminding all that they too were flesh and blood, clay and spit. Clowns were the corrective needed for an overly scholastic religion.

As long as there was only one church and most people did not

read, there was room inside the church for clowns to carry the shadow side of the church's pomp and circumstance. However, when the Reformation came along and the scientific thinking swept the world with logic, clowns were squeezed out into the street and onto Shakespeare's stage, where Falstaff kept the Henrys down-to-earth and Malvolio plotted comic intrigues. Theater held the parts in tension and made these unconscious forces visible.

Now technology is feeding a darker side of violence and destruction. There is little room for innocence, for humor and a hand-made life. We live in a culture that seems deadly serious about the business of making money and exerting power over others. Frankly, I find it heartening that Seekers can be a place where bulletins are made by hand and new clowns are birthed. I hope that we can nurture the creativity and imagination that they embody as a sign of Godly playfulness.

This is the first Sunday of Advent.

Our theme for the season is "What Are We Waiting For?"

The text for today sounds very ominous:

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....

Walter Wink, in a dense dissection of the Son of Man sayings in his recent book, *The Human Being*, suggests that we can read this text in two different ways. One is apocalyptic, ascribing the signs in sun and stars to final judgment and the end of earthly life. The other is eschatological, describing a major shift in consciousness or a metamorphosis, but not the end of earth's story.

Hold those two possibilities in your mind for the moment as we look more closely at this text.

Jesus is identified as the Son of Man in this passage from Luke, not the Son of God. He comes "in glory," that is, in the form of Christ, but he is still identified as the Son of Man, the true human being...inviting listeners to "stand up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

The passage does not sound like final judgment from an angry and destructive God, even though that has been a common interpretation. It sounds to me like an eschatological call to awaken from the sleep of collective habit and cultural numbness, to SEE the wholeness that Jesus embodied as the Son of Man and to BE whom we truly are. "Stand up, raise your heads, your redemption is near" sounds like an invitation to claim our TRUE HUMANITY!

Suddenly this text does not seem as strange as an invitation to Advent. Maybe the Second Coming of Christ arrives in us one at a time, when the careful constructs of our lives begin to fall apart and we see the possibility for true humanity with

our clown eyes...when we hear the words of blessing instead of judgment and fear with our clown ears.

In the years that Frieda used to ride around in the trunk of my car, I once offered to clown the Eucharist for a weeklong class that M.C Richards was teaching at Pendle Hill. When I was a beginning potter back in the Sixties, MC gave me language for the clown-mystic that I discovered there in the clay studio with her classic book, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*. I do not remember why it seemed appropriate to offer Frieda's service that rainy day at Pendle Hill, but I did and MC was enthralled.

When she began painting at the age of 70, this (painting on the altar) was one of her first creations. She brought it for my 50th birthday celebration, taped it on the window at Wellspring – and took it home with her again saying, "I'm not through with it yet." I was surprised and disappointed, not knowing then how the energy of that clown image could quicken one's life over time. It became an icon for her and for me too.

A decade later, she asked Peter and me to clown at her 80th birthday party, on which she blew the entire amount of a small bequest, which was supposed to make her later years a little easier. She did not want it to be used that way. Instead, she threw a marvelous party with clowns and quartet from the Curtis Institute, followed by an elegant champagne dinner for guests who came from all over the country.

MC never would choose one thing OR the other. She wanted both

– thinking and feeling, color and clay, artist and teacher. Until she died at 83, she spent half the year living in a dorm room, teaching for Matt Fox’s University of Creation Centered Spirituality, and half the year living in a household with mentally handicapped adults at Camp Hill Village, Kimberton, PA. She had no money, no security, no insurance and no heirs, but she was rich in creativity, community and call. She lived in one room, drove a communal car and wrote poetry to the end. In my mind, she was the Mother Theresa of the Art World.

Last weekend, I was in New York for the premier of a film of MC’s life and work. I felt honored to be on the panel to discuss her impact in the wider world and I have brought a copy of the film back for Seekers to share around.

All her life, MC wrestled with the image of Christ as Clown in one form or another. Repeatedly, the film shows her deep humanity as she speaks with words, clay and color. She likens her life to an inchworm, one end fixed on a branch and the other waving around, searching for a new place to land. In the final scene, she chuckles and says into the camera, “Trust and not knowing. You can put that on my tombstone, trust and not knowing. That’s what it’s all about.”

Trust in the reality of a greater story.

And not knowing. Eschewing certitude.

That is eschatology.

Frieda says that is what we are waiting for.

Amen.