

"We Will Be Changed ☐ and That's a Promise" by Peter Bankson

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SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

INTRODUCTION

"Promises, promises! We're at the beginning of the season of Advent, the beginning of the liturgical year, the time when we wait for the coming of Christ into the world as one of us. Traditionally, we're waiting for the birth of Jesus, another way for God to be present with us.

We're also waiting for Christmas and the other end-of-the-year holidays, a time when the culture invites us to a rich generosity that can reach beyond the limits of cost and benefit to include others whose links to us are more peripheral.

And THIS year, as we live through an economic tsunami and the transition of administration in our government, we wait to see how the future will unfold, and what is in store for us. This can be a time of reflection, a time of deepening concern or commitment, a time of great promise.

ADVENT IS A TIME OF PROMISE

God's presence in Creation takes on a whole new dimension here as we seek to understand what it means for all of Creation that God is embodied, incarnate – in the flesh.

Our Gospel lesson suggests that as we wait for the joyful coming of Jesus we're in for some serious turbulence along the way.

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then [and only then] they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds, with great power and glory.

This sounds like a time of suffering followed by a time of fearful uncertainty. Is that the promise God has for us? Is this the Good News God is promising us in the coming of Jesus?

Is this what we're living into as the stock market takes many of our investments on a hair-raising roller-coaster ride into a dark and stormy night?

Coming on the heels of the election season we've just lived through, this worship theme for Advent – "Promises, Promises" – might seem a bit cynical. "Promises, Promises:" We've heard them all – lower gas prices, more jobs, no more war, lower taxes, a chicken in every pot... As we enter this short season of waiting for a fresh coming of the Holy One into the world, a fresh act of incarnation. It feels like we're standing in a crowded lobby with lots of others who are waiting as well. What are we waiting for?

Advent is a time of preparation. OK ... what are we waiting for?

ADVENT IS A TIME OF UNEXPECTED CHANGE

The old American dream says we're waiting for a brighter tomorrow. Maybe we're waiting for the arrival of a new Administration, believing that they have the secret map that lays out a path that avoids the pain of uncertainty and loss. I'm sure some of those in the lobby are waiting for that easy solution, but I've been reading the Scripture for this week, and I think I see a different path:

We have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Isa 64: 6-7)

Isaiah listened to the Holy One of Israel and, as I read it, what he heard sounded a lot like Lynn Anderson singing "I beg your pardon: I never promised you a rose garden." The future was brightened by a rosy dream of God's triumph, but there were dark days ahead before the sun would break thru the storm clouds.

Is the current economic anxiety some disastrous invasion of poverty, or is the current uncertainty a necessary part of a deeper invitation to be ready for some new revelation of the

Realm of God?

The Gospel cautions that we need to stay alert. Advent is a time to stay awake. Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem when he offered his followers an image of the future as a parable of the householder who went away on a journey and left his staff in charge, cautioning the doorkeeper to remain at the ready:

Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you [Jesus tells his disciples] I say to all: Keep awake.

Everything will be OK when the householder comes, but we don't know when that will be. In the meantime, can we help each other stay ready; can we share the oil we have to keep our lamps burning brightly as we wait for signs of Good News emerging from the current uncertainty? How can we help each other keep awake ... keep hope alive ... find Good News in the unexpected? Can we be ready to welcome the unexpected?

Here's an example. This coming week Brenda will be traveling to Japan on business. While she's there she'll be able to visit with her father Bruce, who is back in Japan, serving again as a missionary there. He and his wife Delna served their whole adult lives as missionaries in Japan, where Brenda and her sister grew up.

Bruce has had strong ties to Seekers Church. Brenda, Keith Marian and Lauren have been very much a part of our faith community for a long time. The Nativity figures Bruce helped fashion when Marian and Lauren were young girls will return this Advent season to help us tell the story of the Birth of Jesus. And each week we light our prayer candle for peace and justice and place it on the stands he made for us.

After setting down God's call on them to the mission field,

Bruce and Delna settled into a nice retirement community in southern Pennsylvania where they were active in a local church. The future looked comfortably predictable for this retired missionary couple ... until Delna died.

After grieving his loss, Bruce felt God's call to return to Japan. I know this was an unexpected change for lots of folks including his family and congregation. But as I try to place this story in the context of our Gospel lesson for this week, it looks to me like the master of the house returned, and Bruce was ready.

So he closed up his apartment in the retirement community, got himself a new laptop computer to stay in touch with his family back here, and sharpened up his bicycle-riding skills so he'd be able to get around in Japan. Early this year we commissioned Bruce as a Missioner of Seekers Church, expanding our faith community to embrace Bruce in Japan. In some sense we're all in Japan with Bruce. Many of us remember the day we commissioned Bruce before he went back to Japan. We sent him off with our prayers and money from the Growing Edge Fund for a new Japanese bicycle!

There's a card for Bruce on the table in the kitchen in case you'd like to offer him an encouraging word. Brenda will be able to hand-deliver it next weekend.

Did he have a long-term plan to return to Japan? Perhaps. Was the actual call a surprise? Of course! But Bruce was ready. And what I say to you [Jesus tells his disciples] I say to all: Keep awake.

CHANGE ISN'T ALWAYS EASY

Bruce's unanticipated move, especially the physical and emotional challenges it involved, leads me to focus on the image of the Holy One as the potter and we followers of Christ as clay in the potter's hands. After reminding his readers that all of us have sinned and lost sight of how to "gladly do

right," Isaiah calls out to the Holy One:

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are your people.

From the perspective of the clay, the arrival of the potter marks a time of being changed – seriously changed! I've lived close to the potter's work for a long time. It's creative work for the potter ... and a major investment for the clay. When Marjory sets out to make a pot, first she cuts off a piece of clay that is big enough to do the job. Then she gets down on her knees and kneads the clay until it has lost all sense of its former shape, until it is pliable and elastic enough to be shaped into something entirely new. Then she slams the soft clay body down on her potter's wheel hard enough so that it is stuck. Only then does the shaping begin.

When I enter the story from the perspective of the clay the pain and uncertainty are palpable – kneaded into elasticity, slammed onto a spinning potter's wheel, pressed into the center. "O LORD ... we are the clay and you are our potter" is not an invitation to something comfortable or predictable, at least not for the clay.

The process of turning a solid lump of raw clay into something satisfying to the potter takes centering ... opening ... shaping ... trimming. Along the way the potter may decide to start over, crush what has begun to emerge and begin again using the same lump of clay in a different way! When I stop to think about it, my life fits this cycle pretty well, kneaded, centered, shaped, trimmed. Does this feel at all familiar to you? Maybe this Advent season we can begin to see our current situation as clay in the hands of a loving, holy potter rather than consumers in the invisible hand of an impersonal market, or sinners in the hands of an angry God.

"O LORD ... we are the clay and you are our potter." Are you

with me?

Finally, when the shape of the clay fits what has been in the imagination of the potter the pot is decorated and fired. That way it will retain its shape and serve its function for a long time. Firing takes away the flexibility but incarnates a solidity that can last for centuries.

Since Marjory set up her studio in our townhouse in Springfield, Virginia in 1970 I've been watching – and occasionally helping out while she does her work. I've had the opportunity to make a pot of two of my own. Here's the first one that made it to the firing stage. [Show the salt-glazed beggar's bowl.] I made it about 30 years ago. Over its life it has served as an offering bowl, a drinking cup, a pencil holder and the place where pennies gather on my dresser.

Simple ... sturdy ... versatile. I like the image it models, for pottery and for people in community. Same raw material ... different shapes to meet different needs. I've been interested to see how the shape of this little faith community has been shaped by our move here from the Headquarters of Church of the Saviour on Massachusetts Avenue four years ago. We seem to be reaching out to different people in familiar ways. I've been aware of how my own sense of God's call is being kneaded during that time, and how often I feel slammed on the wheel. Maybe that feeling of being slammed down hard will keep happening until I stick around long enough to get centered in some particular new way...

Over the past three and a half decades I've learned a few lessons about clay. Here are some of them to reflect on as we consider what it might mean to be clay in God's hands, as we face into this Advent season of waiting for the fresh coming of Jesus among us:

1. *Clay has a mind of its own – but the clay is not as smart as the potter.*

The potter can always imagine something that the clay can not support. Creativity insists that the Creator honor the qualities of the creation. No matter how much I enjoy my own creativity, there are times when I am humbled by the realization that God has something much more exciting in mind for me, if I'll stick with the centering.

2. *Clay will sit in a lump without complaining for a long time: It takes a potter to form the clay into something new. I've watched this happen in my own basement. After all these years I've never seen a box of clay make itself into a pot. The clay will wait until the potter has an inspiration. God willing I should be so faithful! But then, waiting for God to take the next step can feel a lot like procrastination. Here's where my spiritual director is really helpful as I try to discern the difference.*

3. *The potter is involved with the clay up to the armpits. Any good potter loves the clay, and will do everything possible to shape it into something wonderful.*

I don't know how to make pottery without getting clay under my fingernails. And I have a deep affection for what I've been able to make. With God as our Potter, I look forward to learning how we will turn out.

"O LORD ... we are the clay and you are our potter."

CONCLUSION: WE WILL BE CHANGED – AND THAT'S A PROMISE

Every Advent is a time of promise, a time when we get ready to welcome Jesus into our lives in a new way. This year we have an opportunity to consider how we are being shaped by a loving God. Advent is a time of preparation. What are we waiting for?

Our Scripture for this week and the daily news all tell us that these days sound like a prophetic time, a time of suffering followed by a time of fearful uncertainty. But is that the whole promise God has for us? Where is the Good News that God is promising us in the coming of Jesus? Is this what

we're living into as the stock market takes many of our investments on a hair-raising roller-coaster ride into a dark and stormy night? I believe that the Good News is that everything will be OK when the Realm of God is clearly here, but we don't know when. We need to be ready. How can we help each other keep hope alive, and be ready for a change?

And finally, God's promise to us is that these changes won't all be easy, or comfortable. Like clay in the hands of the Holy Potter of all Reality we can expected to be stretched further than we thought possible, molded until we express the imagination of a loving Creator, and put to work, carrying the Good News to those who are in need. "O LORD ... we are the clay and you are our potter." Are you with me? Keep praying! Amen.