

November 29, 2015 / First Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

### **Wait, Abound in Love, Keep the Vision**

Psalm 25:1-10 *...you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 *And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...*

Luke 21:25-38

*“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life....”*

Advent is the four-week season that precedes the celebration of Christmas, the birth of Jesus. Advent is counter-cultural. It slows us down and keeps us from being sucked into the cultural celebration of Christmas, which, even in the church itself, has become emptied of the true and challenging meaning of Jesus who embodied God's love and calls us to do the same. Pope Francis recently said that the whole celebration of Christmas is a “charade... because the whole world is at war”. Advent has always been there to keep us from that charade, IF we pay attention to it.

Historically, Advent served as a season of self-examination and penitence, a time for the church to look at its life in light of God's love and call in Jesus. Advent, then, is a season to rekindle our awareness of belonging to a different order of things, biblically referred to as the kingdom or realm of God. It is the rule of God's compassion, justice, and love throughout the world, beginning with our own lives. The realm of God is not the order of things today. Resurgent racism in our nation. Gun violence everywhere. Religion used as a pretext for hate and violence. Would-be leaders fanning the flames of fear, hate, and willful ignorance. Violence giving birth to violence, a cycle we are unwilling to recognize or to break. And Christians are caught more in defending a religion than living out the spirit and teachings of the one who is at the center of our tradition, the one whose birth we prepare to celebrate.

What do our readings for this First Sunday of Advent suggest to us about how we are to live and what we are to do as followers of Jesus, as a community of Jesus?

Psalm 25, first of all, is a call to WAIT. The psalmist looks only to God as the source of hope and guidance and deliverance. “You are the God of my salvation(healing, help); for you I wait all day long.” At the end of the psalm, the theme is repeated: “May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.” Waiting is a dominant theme of Advent. We are called to learn to wait, even in the midst of all that is going on around us, to quiet our inner life and open to God. Waiting keeps us from being drawn into the charade of the cultural Christmas. It enables us to be aware of the presence and movements of God in and around us.

Waiting, in this spiritual sense, is not DOING NOTHING. It is active waiting. It is the work of what we call the inward journey, the daily and ongoing spiritual work of self-awareness and self-understanding, of looking more closely and deeply at our own lives and life around us. It is watchful waiting, paying attention to life within and around us, seeing it within God and God's love and purposes.

With so much that is harmful going on around us, in our society and world, we may want to jump into action or to conclusions about what we think the solutions are. When we cultivate watchful waiting, however, we get a keener insight into things. We also begin to know what WE are called to do or to say in response to the needs around us. That is what we in our community speak of as call, as well as gifts. We believe that God works most effectively through us when we are aware of what we are called to do and what our gifts are. I think this is how we can read the psalmist's words: “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.” It has to do with the ways, the paths that God reveals to each of us and in which God leads us. Waiting has to do with becoming inwardly sensitive and receptive to both the needs of the world around us and the ways God calls and leads each of us to respond.

Waiting is not the opposite of action, just as prayer is not contrary to service. Prayer, waiting, the inward journey, is the inward work we do in order to live differently in the world, to live as those who, by our mere being as well as our actions, are channels of God's reign of steadfast love, of peace, of right and just relationships. Simply put, waiting is the openness and attunement **of our lives to God** and God's loving purposes in the world and in our own lives.

In the reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus is giving a teaching on the “last things”, on the ultimate meaning and outcome and purpose of life. The technical word for this kind of prophetic teaching is “apocalyptic”, meaning literally to take the lid off and look into

something. The teachings are full of signs and wonders and upheavals. We could see all of that as reflecting the things going on today. The lids are coming off our violence, our hatred, our racism, our material greed and its cost in terms of human and creational life. What is going to come of it? When and how will it all end? Will we at last make the changes necessary to live differently? These are the kinds of experiences and questions people of faith have had for centuries. And they are part of our spiritual lives today.

Jesus' teachings have the central message that we can trust that God is at work in and through everything, even the chaos and upheaval. We are not to let ourselves get caught up in the fear, the violence, the panic, the hate, so that we lose our spiritual bearings. Jesus says it in different ways. Be on your guard. Do not let your hearts be weighed down by everything around you. Be alert at all times. Another day is dawning. Another order of things is being worked out. And that is what you are preparing to perceive, to receive, and to be part of. It is God's realm, God's reign of love in all of life. That is what you are called to as my followers, Jesus is saying.

On Thursday, at the annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, our friend Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid gave the message for the day. He is, as you know, the spiritual leader of the World Community, a Sufi Muslim community. They have worshiped with us here, and we feel a spiritual kinship between our two communities. Shaykh Rashid's words were not new, but they rang with keen truth and a call to us all as people of faith to live in the love, the gratitude, the service to which all our traditions point. They were words of spiritual calming and sanity in a culture and world that seems to have lost its heart as well as its mind. These, too, were words of watchful waiting, of being alert and awake.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist teacher, writer, and monk, writes about his experience of working with the so-called "boat people" who were escaping Vietnam following the end of that war. Just like refugees today, they were packed into small boats, facing the dangerous seas and even pirates who would assault them. Thich Nhat Hanh says that in those boats, when the seas were rough and threatening to swamp them, if only one person could remain calm and peaceful, it could affect all the others and save many lives. I think Jesus is saying something similar here. In the midst of all that is happening around us, we are to keep our hearts awake, alert, and watchfully waiting. We are called to be spiritually alert so that we can perceive within the turmoil the workings of God to bring about a new day, the day of the reign of God's love in the hearts and lives of all people. Then we will know how we are to live NOW according to that new day, that new and true

order of life.

In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, this theme is continued. Paul is writing to a community he founded and about which he continues to be concerned, and which he loves very much. In his opening words to them(1:2ff), Paul expresses deep gratitude for this little community that is so full of the love of God. This community so deeply lives in this faith that Paul believes it has affected the whole world around them. Paul has not been back to visit them, and they are anxious for him to return. He wants badly to come back and do what he can “to restore what is lacking in their faith”(v. 10). The times are not easy. The community in Thessalonica has faced resistance and hostility. The world of that time was no less full of confusion and violence and upheaval than ours is.

Paul wants the community to continue, to thrive. So what does he advise? Try to attract new members? Launch a big financial campaign? Build a large and impressive facility, and jazz up their worship to reflect the social trends around them? No. None of the things we today think of as making for success. Paul prays that God will make them “increase and abound in love for one another and for all....” That is the first work of the community of Jesus—to grow in love for one another and all people. It is a work that is never finished, always learning what it really means to love with the love of God, to love others, the world, our own lives. The word Paul uses here for “abounding” in love means overflowing, always having a surplus, never being exhausted. If we continue to live in and out of this love, to be a community in which we all are being healed, filled and led by God's love, we are tapping into a wellspring of love that can truly fill the world.

Based on my experience of growing up in the church, of more than forty years of ministry, and especially the last thirteen years being part of this community, it is my firmest belief that what is needed perhaps most of all in this nation and world are small communities of people, seriously committed to the life of love. Communities where living out God's love is the central work, in which people's lives are being transformed from fear to love, from brokenness to wholeness, from self-concern and self-preservation to serving life around them. Communities in which people, no matter their life circumstances and experiences, find the profound welcome of unconditional love, but in which they also find the call to and indeed the expectation of growing in the life of loving and serving others. I believe that the violence, the hate, the greed, the materialism of life around us, and in us, are all rooted in fear. And only love can overcome fear, our own fear and the fear in others.

I would like to leave us with an image from our gospel reading. After Jesus has finished his teachings about the “big picture”, the importance of remaining watchful, attuning our hearts to God, even in the midst of turmoil, he retires for the night to the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives is outside the city of Jerusalem. The Jews of Jesus’ day believed that God or God’s messiah would appear on that hilltop on the Day of the coming of God’s kingdom. When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last week of his life, he came down that sacred hill, mindful of the significance and symbolism of what he was doing. During that final week, he retreats each evening to that sacred height, to rest and pray.

Jesus sees things within the wide and deep perspective of God’s kingdom, God’s realm of love and justice and peace. That is what he was trying to teach his disciples, as well. Keep growing spiritually so that you see, more and more, from the perspective of God’s love, so that you see this world within the realm of God’s loving care and the redemptive, healing movements of God’s spirit. This is also part of our spiritual work, to grow beyond seeing life from the narrow and limited perspective of self, of nation, of culture, of one political view or another, even from religion. The call and movement of God’s spirit in us, as we follow Jesus, is to return from time to time to the Mount of Olives, to prayer, to watching, to waiting, to opening our inner vision to God’s vision for life. And then to be part of what God is doing in the world through the diverse callings and gifts God has given us.

Growing in our capacity to wait for God. Being a community that abounds more and more in love. Seeing all of life through the lens of God’s vision for life. This is all the work of the inward journey and outward journey of faith, as persons and as a community.