

“Get Ready”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
November 27th, 2016
1st Sun. in Advent

Psalm 122

Matthew 24:36-44

*43 But know this, that if the householder had known
in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and
would not have let his house be broken into.*

*44 Therefore you also must be ready;
for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

Matthew 24:43-44

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to know who you are as a God of justice & peace,
and to know who we are as people of Christ.

May we be ready for the challenges before us as people of goodwill,
to speak your truth and show forth your love by how we treat other people.

Amen

Hopefully, you have all survived reconnecting with family this Thanksgiving holiday,
to share a meal and get caught up on family news –
while avoiding the slippery slope of talking politics!

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies”
was a real concern this Thanksgiving-time.

Saturday Night Live did a skit about a family at the Thanksgiving table
just about to tear themselves apart with arguments –

when a child turns on a music box with
the song, “Hello” by popular singer, Adele.

The skit ends with everyone dressed like Adele – even the men, who are in drag,
all singing along to these lyrics...

[Pre-Chorus 1]

There's such a difference between us; And a million miles.

[Chorus]

Hello from the other side; I must've called a thousand times

To tell you I'm sorry, for everything that I've done

But when I call you, [you] never seem to be home...

Songwriters: KURSTIN, GREGORY / ADKINS, ADELE Hello lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

What we have just been through as a nation has not been ‘politics as usual’.

We are in new territory – but in terms of human history,
this is really nothing new.

Jesus told his disciples to ‘get ready’ – and they believed the end times were at hand,
but the fact is that we are *always* in the ‘end times’.

Think of the times you grew up in, how that shaped you,
and what gave you hope...

Willard, p.2

I grew up living next to a Jewish family,

so the threat of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews has a context for me.

I grew up living in a city that was predominantly African-American,

so I have a context for Civil Rights and the uncivil war between black & white.

I grew up with the fear that Khrushchev and the Russians were going to bury us,

so I have a context for the Cold War and brainwashing.

I grew up when there was a hot war going on in Vietnam,

so I have a context for national service and political deception.

I grew up as a nominal Christian in a church with an activist pastor & youth minister,

so I have a context for Christ the Liberator active in our world.

Young people growing up these days, have a context like me –

and like those of you who grew up during the Great Depression and WWII,

when it seemed like the world was coming apart at the seams;

and just like us, they will find their way.

You have found your way here, to this congregation where we're asking & exploring what it means to be a 'Christian' in this time and place.

So, let us consider the times we are living in now, and what gives us hope.

Here's an inventory of some of my lessons learned and relearned at UCCatV...

"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here..."

We begin each Sunday service as if we were starting out on a journey together.

My journey with this congregation began when we were still meeting

at Temple Shalom – the synagogue up the street.

When construction on this building was finished,

we literally walked down the street on a 'kadimah' – a pilgrimage,

and many from the Temple came with us, to bless us.

This is the first congregation I served that was 'open & affirming' –

accepting LGBTQ people for who they are, as is.

Not all UCC congregations are there yet to be ONA,

but UCC at The Villages started out that way,

bypassing the process most churches are required to go through.

We didn't because most of our straight charter members

either had relatives or friends who were LGBTQ

along with fellow church members.

Therefore, one of the great lessons of this congregation is:

"When you know somebody, it makes a difference" –

gay rights is not hypothetical for us, it's personal.

The example of those who 'come out of the closet' to be themselves,

with all the risks that implies, has led me to reclaim one of my earliest beliefs:

To be 'born again' is to come out of your 'cocoon' to 'be who you are' –

an authentic Christian, an authentic human being.

Willard, p.3

Support for this idea comes from the theologian and author, Walter Wink, who makes the case with the hardest text on this issue: Romans 1:26-27 which in words to this effect, warns: “Don’t go against your nature.” Yet if the Apostle Paul knew what we know now about human biology & psychology, he would say to the LGBTQ community: “Don’t go against your nature,” “Be yourself”, “Be who you are.” “Be who God created you to be” – which is a message for us all.

This carries over to the challenge of interfaith outreach which works because we encourage one another to “be who we are” confident in a shared Spirit of compassion. By this way of thinking, we can even find allies among humanists and moral atheists who ‘love [their]neighbor’... On the other hand, cults are bound by coercive practices instead of compassion; So to them, we make our case for transformation by the example of empathy. An example of this is by telling stories – your own and of people you know, because when you know someone through their story, it makes a difference...

Our message as Christians is to proclaim the Good News of God ‘in Christ’ – preferably by deeds and – if necessary, by words.

What I believe the Apostle Paul meant by ‘God in Christ’ is that Christians are to help introduce people to God through the stories, teachings, and traditions about Jesus of Nazareth.

I don’t believe we are supposed to convert everyone in the world to our affiliation as members of the ‘Church’.

I believe it is enough for the world to encounter God through Christ as friend just as Buddhists, Baptists, and Bohemians encounter Christ through you as a friend – a friend who heals, a friend who saves the day for you, a friend who won’t let you get away with anything, a friend who stands with you come hell or high water...

Jesus said, ‘This is my body...’ by breaking bread, symbolizing no more blood sacrifice, no more shedding of blood.

Yet sadly not as an end to *self*-sacrifice – for that still happens even to the death.

Contemporary theologian Dominic Crossan teaches that Jesus dying on the cross was not about paying a debt, but about setting an example and a challenge to participate in the building up of God’s Kingdom of Heaven – the Body of Christ as Paul called it.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that drew forth Martin Luther King, Jr. and others to participate in the building up of a ‘beloved community’ demanded self-sacrifice, even to the death.

Willard, p.4

The dream of 'beloved community' is a vision of God's 'Kingdom come' as a social reality that is possible, 'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.

The Beloved Community of God's Kingdom is not a utopia;

It is meant to be diverse, argumentative, yet with a balance of power, as opposed to a world of 'dog eat dog' survival of the fittest,

In the Beloved Community, 'forgiveness is the best revenge'

as modeled by Jesus from the cross when he said,

'Abba Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

As Paul said in 1st Corinthians 1:23,

'...we preach Christ crucified...'

Religious writer Rene Girard describes the Crucifixion-Resurrection

as a 'counter-myth' to the 'myth of redemptive violence'

brought on by 'scapegoating'.

Christ broke the vicious cycle of punishing the vulnerable

as people looked at him on the cross – and eventually saw they were wrong.

Some found empathy that day as they realized Jesus was as unjustly treated

as countless innocent people before him and ever since.

Yet this time it was the innocent Son of God who showed them that the victim was the hero of this story because of the Resurrection.

We don't have proof beyond the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles for this –

except to say *something happened*.

Something happened to turn despair into joy, to turn fishermen into shepherds,

to turn disciples into missionaries,

to turn an Empire into a home for the Church. Something happened...

Those missionaries – or apostles, went out two by two, no extra sandals, clothes, money bag, walking stick – just a warning:

to keep focused on the communities they would visit

and build relationships with the homeowners who would take them in.

As homeless people, what they had to offer was the ability to heal, teach prayer,

tell the stories of God through Christ, sing the songs, baptize, and

share communion.

In this way, the followers of Jesus planted the seeds of the Church

as a model for the Kingdom.

The first converts in Europe – where Christianity would take hold and flourish,

included a woman named Lydia who was a wealthy merchant of purple cloth.

Though women would be excluded from the priestly tradition,

women played an important role in the early Church –

and have re-emerged to play a vital role for the liberation

of many people stuck on the margins of society.

Willard, p.5

Seminary professor and writer Phyllis Tribble has helped me see how feminist theology reinforces the reliability of scripture as well as give voice to those whose story must often be read between the lines.

I am telling you all this as a sort of recap of many sermon themes I have shared with you over the years. Primarily this is to get you ready, reinforcing what has been said, and hopefully sparking interest to learn more.

Nothing is better though than the Gospel narrative itself and how Jesus prepared his apostles...

Inspired by Matthew 24:1-14

HAVING COME FROM THE TEMPLE,
JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS WERE DEPARTING JERUSALEM;
AND THE DISCIPLES WERE FASCINATED
BY THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE TEMPLE,
POINTING OUT TO PARTS OF IT.
BUT JESUS RESPONDED TO THEM, SAYING,
“YOU SEE ALL OF THIS, DO YOU NOT?
I TELL YOU THE TRUTH,
NOTHING WILL BE LEFT HERE OF STONE UPON STONE
WHICH WILL NOT HAVE BEEN DESTROYED.”

AS JESUS WAS SETTLING DOWN FOR THE NIGHT AT THE MOUNT OF OLIVES.
HIS DISCIPLES CAME TO SPEAK TO HIM PRIVATELY, SAYING,
“WHEN WILL THIS HAPPEN?”
“SO, WHAT IS THE SIGNAL FOR YOUR ATTACK?”
“THEN, IS THIS THE END OF TIME?”

AND JESUS ANSWERED THEM,
“BE AWARE SO THAT NO ONE CAN DECEIVE YOU.
FOR MANY WILL COME IN MY NAME SAYING,
‘I AM THE MESSIAH!’ AND MANY WILL BE TRICKED.
SO CERTAINLY,
YOU WILL HEAR OF WARS AND THREATS OF WAR.
WATCH OUT – SO THAT YOU ARE NOT DISMAYED,
BECAUSE IT IS NECESSARY FOR THESE THINGS TO HAPPEN.
BUT IT WILL NOT BE THE END.

Willard, p.6

ETHNIC GROUP WILL RISE UP AGAINST ETHNIC GROUP,
AND NATIONALISTS AGAINST NATIONALISTS.
AND THERE WILL BE FAMINES AND EARTHQUAKES
EVERYWHERE.

ALL THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING –
THE PAIN OF BIRTH.

“BUT YOU WILL BE BETRAYED INTO OPPRESSION
AND PUT TO DEATH.

AND YOU WILL BE HATED BY ALL FACTIONS
BECAUSE OF THE NAME ‘JESUS’.

AND THEN, MANY WILL FALL INTO SCANDAL,
BETRAYING ONE ANOTHER AND HATING ONE ANOTHER.

SO, MANY FALSE PROPHETS WILL BE LIFTED UP
AND MANY PEOPLE WILL BE DRAWN IN BY THEM.

AND THROUGH THE FESTERING OF LAWLESSNESS,
LOVE WILL BE POISONED IN MANY PEOPLE’S HEARTS.

BUT THE ONE WHOSE LOVE ENDURES TO THE END,
WILL BE SAVED.

AND THAT IS THE GOOD NEWS OF BELOVED COMMUNITY
THAT MUST BE PROCLAIMED EVERYWHERE
IN THE INHABITED WORLD

AS A WITNESS AGAINST EXTREME-ISMS
AND THEN THE END WILL TRULY BE – A BEGINNING.”

So, the advent of the Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity
will be a good thing – the occasion for hope...

Amen

*Our lesson today from Psalm 122 is in the form of a song for pilgrims
rejoicing upon their arrival at Jerusalem...*

- ¹It made me glad to hear them say,
“Let’s go to the house of the LORD!”
- ² Jerusalem, we are standing inside your gates.
³ Jerusalem, what a strong and beautiful city you are!
- ⁴ Every tribe of the LORD obeys him and comes to you to praise his name.
⁵ David’s royal throne is here where justice rules.
- ⁶ Jerusalem, we pray that you will have peace,
and that all will go well for those who love you.
- ⁷ May there be peace inside your city walls and in your palaces.
⁸ Because of my friends and my relatives, I will pray for peace.
- ⁹ And because of the house of the LORD our God,
I will work for your good.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 24:36-44

[Jesus said,]

36 “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven,
nor the Son, but the Father only.

37 As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man.

38 For as in those days before the flood

they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,
until the day when Noah entered the ark,

39 and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away,
so will be the coming of the Son of man.

40 Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left.

41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left.

42 Watch therefore,

for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

43 But know this, that if the householder had known

in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and
would not have let his house be broken into.

44 Therefore you also must be ready;

for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.