First Sunday of Advent

Jer. 33:14-16 1 Thess. 3:9-13 Lk. 21:25-36

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 12-1-24

The first Sunday in Advent, which we are observing this morning, is also the first Sunday in a new church year, which always feels a bit odd to me, as it seems like the Church could have chosen a sunnier, more up-beat time of year to turn the page on the church calendar… some time other than December, when the cold and dark of winter begin to settle in…

And, in terms of the Christian story, it seems like the Church could have chosen a Sunday when we're celebrating something really glorious to begin a new year, like Transfiguration or Pentecost or Easter…

But no… Here we are, on the first Sunday of a new Church year in the dark of December with a Gospel text that is not only **not** triumphant or glorious, but more of the apocalyptic language we heard the Sunday before last about the travail and tribulation of the end times, as the old dispensations of violence and greed and "power over" finally, in a cataclysmic sequence of events, give way to the dawn of God's kingdom come…

A strange and frightening text about **endings** to mark the **beginning** of a new church year… And not only that, but just when we might expect our Gospel text from Luke to be at least a small preparatory lead-in to the story of Jesus' birth, which we will celebrate in just a few weeks, it is actually the very last address Jesus delivers to

his disciples in Luke's Gospel before his entrance into Jerusalem and his passion and death…

A farewell address in which Jesus admonishes his disciples to be alert… to be on guard for anything that might keep them from being ready for the day when the "Son of Man" will return in his glory to overturn the status quo and to usher in the fulness and completeness of the kingdom or kin-dom of God…

All of which leaves us on this first Sunday of the church year in the dark and the cold, with a Gospel text immersed in endings and a call to **be alert**… echoing poet Antonio Machado's insight as he begins one of his poems about Jesus this way, saying,

I love Jesus, who says to us

heaven and earth will pass away...

The poet then proceeding to ask Jesus what his one last word will be when heaven and earth have passed away, saying, "Will your last word be love, Jesus? Will it be forgiveness? Affection?" No, writes Antonio Machado, "all your words can be and will be summed up in one word… 'Wake up.'"

"Wake up to what?" we might ask. Unlike those in Luke's fledgling first century Chrisian community, we're not expecting the second coming of Jesus to arrive at any minute… But still, our texts and hymns and prayers on this first Sunday of the church year on this first Sunday in Advent remind us that as Christians we live in expectation for the time when, by the power of love made incarnate in Jesus, peace will dawn, and justice will prevail, and all of creation will be made one in a great constellation of love… And so, say our texts, our hymns and our

liturgy, we need to be alert and awake for its coming…Whenever that might be…

"And in the meantime… in the meantime," say our texts, our hymns and our liturgies, "while we are waiting for God's kingdom to come in its fulness, **we are also called to be alert, to wake-up to the other ways in which the incarnate presence of God's love made known in Jesus lives and moves and has its being among us, even in the travails and tumults of the times in which we find ourselves…"**

Inviting us, as I told the children a bit ago, to play the Christian version of "I Spy"… which is, "I Spy Jesus, even as I await his coming both in the Christmas story and in his glory, at the end of time…"

So, if we are alert… awake, where might we spy Jesus in the complexity, the ambiguity, the suffering and the beauty of the world in which we live?

As I thought about this question this week, I kept returning to the 1997 film "Paradise Road: Song of Survival," which tells the story of the hundreds of Australian, British and American women interned in a Japanese camp on the island of Sumatra from April 1942 to the end of the Second World War in August of 1945.

During those years of captivity the women endured not only hunger, disease, and brutality beyond our imagining, but also the very real questions that would plague anyone in such horrific circumstances… Questions like, "When will this horror end? How do I hold on in the meantime?"

And in the midst of all this suffering and all these questions, as the women waited and waited for deliverance from their captivity, two of the women formed an acapella choir of thirty voices, and with scores of orchestral music which they knew by heart and transcribed into any

paper they could find, they taught the women by rote, singing the complex orchestral parts musical phrase by musical phrase, works written by Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Tchaikovsky… Creating a vocal orchestra…

That vocal orchestra performing concerts for all the women in the camp, as well as for their captors until half the singers had died from malnutrition and disease… But, in the meantime, as one survivor of the story said, "In the meantime the vocal orchestra provided for us a kind of miracle, reinforcing our sense of human dignity and helping us to believe we could rise above it all… helping us to believe we could struggle on…"

Our stories… yours and mine aren't set in such devastating circumstances of course. Nor would most of us have the capacity or the ability to transcribe from memory entire scores of orchestral masterpieces and then to teach them by rote, phrase by phrase to others…

But the story of what the creators and the singers of the vocal orchestra in the Japanese interment camp did **while they were waiting** for deliverance from their horrific experience, leads me to believe that one of the things we are called to be alert to, **to be awake to** in the fears and anxieties of our own time is ***any possibility… any possibility what-so-ever*** for seeing or for bearing witness to beauty, to human dignity, to compassion and justice and love while we are waiting for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven…

Any possibility… Staying awake and alert to ways in which we might use our own gifts and passions to incarnate the presence of God's love in the meantime… the presence we Christians call Jesus, or the

Spirit of Christ… So others might say in whatever circumstance they may find themselves, “I spy love, or God, or hope, or beauty, even here, even now…”

If one place where we might spy Jesus is in the possibilities for love, beauty and dignity lived into, taken up and acted upon, then 12th century Cistercian monk and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux gives us another place, as he says we can spy Jesus in the lonely prisoner, the hungry mother, the weary refugee, the migrant worker, the asylum seeker, the one we call “other…”

Returning again to the film about the women who created the vocal orchestra in the Japanese internment camp, there’s a scene that speaks to what Bernard of Clairvaux was trying to say about spying Jesus in the face of the “other”…

Most specifically the scene in which one of the cruelest guards orders Norah Chambers, the choral director, to go with him into the jungle surrounding the camp…

It's a scene fraught with tension, as viewers anticipate the worst outcome for Norah Chambers… The sword-bearing guard taking her father and farther into the dense jungle until they get to a place where he orders her to sit on a fallen log… And then, standing close enough to strike her with his sword… he begins… to sing…

Asking Norah Chambers when he’s done if she thinks has a good voice… if she thinks he can sing…

And in that shocking moment, when she looks at him and sees something other than “enemy,” and he looks at her and sees something other than “enemy”… In that moment, I believe we spy Jesus… We glimpse the Spirit of Christ… We see the presence, the movement of

love and compassion made incarnate in a jungle on the island of Sumatra in the middle of a world war… the rising of something that speaks of human understanding and connection in the most God-forsaken of circumstances… For a very brief moment in time we see a possibility no one would have ever imagined possible…

Did that moment change the outcome of the war? No. Did it change the way that particular guard treated the women in the internment camp from the day forward? No. Was it a moment that would go down in history as one of unmitigated success? No.

But it was a moment when the kingdom of God, yet in the process of dawning, made its way to a particular place and a particular time… and even in the re-telling of the story we know it to be sacred… holy… a thin place, where two people, who in the world's way of seeing, shared nothing of meaning or beauty between them, bore witness to the presence of something beyond the horrors of the time… Something to which we can point and say, "I spy Jesus… I spy the light of Christ shining in the darkness…"

If the story of the vocal orchestra wakes us up to see Jesus' presence in the ***possibilities*** for love and compassion and in the ***face of the "other,"*** then it also wakes us up to see and to know the presence of Jesus in our own hearts… in each of our own hearts…

The film "Paradise Road" doesn't give the viewer much background information about the two women who created and led the vocal orchestra… But one of them, Margaret Dryburgh, was a Presbyterian missionary. And together, she and Norah Chambers wrote a hymn which the women in the choir sang, a portion of which goes like this…

Father in captivity
We would lift our prayer to Thee.
Keep us ever in Thy love,
Grant that daily we may prove
Those who place their trust in Thee,
More than conquerors may be.

Give us patience to endure,
Keep our hearts serene and pure.
Grant us courage, charity,
Greater faith, humility,
Readiness to own Thy will,
Be we free or captive still…

May the day of freedom dawn,
Peace and justice be reborn,
Grant that nations loving Thee
O're the world may brothers be,
Cleansed by suffering know rebirth,
See thy kingdom come on earth.

I can't imagine writing those words in the horrors of an internment camp without knowing that the love of God has come to dwell in one's own heart… I can't imagine writing those words without "seeing, sensing, spying" Jesus (the light of Christ) to be not only above, beneath, behind, and beyond, but within one's own being… speaking words whereby we would know deep in our hearts the love from which we have come, and the love to which we will return, and the love that holds us in the meantime through whatever travails we may have to endure… "waking us up" and giving us voices to proclaim, "I spy Jesus here, within me," even as I await his coming in the fulness of time…

Certainly it must have been so for Margaret Dryburgh and Norah Chambers…

Just as it can be for each of us on this first Sunday of the church year, on the first Sunday of Advent, as we are invited by our texts, our hymns and our liturgy to "wake up," to be alert, even in the dark and cold of December and in the devastations and suffering of our world… to "wake up" to the ways in which Jesus is coming, bearing the love and mercy of God to each of us, and opening our hearts and our eyes to see the thousands of ***possibilities*** for making that love known… so others might, through our words and deeds, be able to say, "I spy Jesus… I sense the light of Christ, the love of God, shining in the darkness…"

May it be so for each of us this morning, dear friends… No matter what we may be waiting for "In the meantime" of our days and nights… May we wake up to the love that is Emmanuel God with us, even now, even as we await his coming in glory…