**Advent 1**

**November 27, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen**.

Well, I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving and navigated the conversations about our recent presidential election without hitting too many shoals … or running aground altogether. And I hope those of you that partook of Black Friday sales were able to purchase everything you wanted at the price you had anticipated.

On a personal note, Thanksgiving is always a little bitter-sweet for me. My father died in late October of 1999. The family gathered at my sister’s house in Baltimore for that Thanksgiving … the first time we were together after my father’s funeral … and we set a place for him at the table. But just a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving Caren’s mother fell and broke her hip in Del Ray beach; the week before Thanksgiving Caren was diagnosed with breast cancer; and the day before Thanksgiving my nephew’s half-brother was killed in a motorcycle accident. Eight years later my mother died on the anniversary of my father’s death, and Thanksgiving that year the family gathered to distribute her belongings. Then five weeks ago my sister-in-law had a stroke and as they looked for a cause they discovered lung cancer. She died this week the day before Thanksgiving. She was 64 years old. Yet, my brother, in his deep grief, still called all his siblings to wish them a happy Thanksgiving and said how thankful he was to have spent time with his wife Patty. So, this Thanksgiving especially, was bitter-sweet.

This is the Sunday after Thanksgiving … but it is also the First Sunday of the Church’s Advent season. Advent is that time before Christmas that the Church uses to prepare for the Feast of the Incarnation.

In Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome he writes: “Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep.” And in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says: “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” But the question is, what do we have to do to “wake up” and be “ready?” And for that matter, what does the prophet Isaiah’s comment about “beat[ing] their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” have to do with all this? And why do we have to spend this time “preparing” for Christmas in this churchy way? Why don’t we just enjoy this holiday season like so many other people do?

I begin each of my sermons with an invocation of the God that I know … the God of all Creation … the God that is alive in us as God was alive in Jesus … and the power God that we know today that we call God’s Spirit or the Holy Spirit. At Christmas we celebrate God coming alive in this world in the baby Jesus … that is the Incarnation. And the Incarnation that happen in Jesus can happen to each of us as well. Of course, it is not limited to the date of December 25 … it can happen to us at any time: “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” The Church has just set a date on the calendar so that we are reminded year after year that this incarnation is an intentional act on our part. That is what Paul is saying: “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.” Paul’s instructions earlier in Romans to “let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”

So, this Advent we are being encouraged to “wake up” and “put on the armor of light” in a world around us torn by divisiveness and rancor. I really do hope that you were able to navigate those divisive conversations … or at least avoid them … at the Thanksgiving table, but what about in the days ahead. How is it that we are being called to act so that we can be “ready” … that we can be an incarnation of God and therefore realize the Son of Man in our own lives?

At Christmas … the Feast of the Incarnation … we celebrate God coming alive in this world in Jesus. Jesus lived that incarnation … that God alive in him … by living a life that reflected the values of God in everything he did and taught. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously that is our path to know the incarnation in our own lives as well. First and foremost is to live a life of love, not fear. That is what Paul is saying about “not reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy” all of which are products of fear … conscious and unconscious fear.

Fundamentally, there are really only two primary emotions: love and fear. It is fear that causes people to push away another person because of their skin color, or religion, or immigrant status, or sexual or gender orientation, or ideology, or politics. It is our fear of those that we really don’t know that leads us to assumptions about what the other person is like because of how they look or sound or even who they vote for. Love on the other hand acknowledges each person as another child of God. This kind of love is not spineless, it does not mean passive agreement, but it does mean acknowledging that each and every human person deserves to belong, to participate, to contribute and to succeed in our world today. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Fear cannot drive out fear, only love can do that.” Paul says, “Put on the armor of light.” Isaiah is speaking to a people who have just returned from exile … but they are troubled about their future, and what God has in store for them. Isaiah points to a world where God’s love permeates everything … everyone … everywhere. A world where love reigns and was is a distant memory.

You know I’m not a Biblical literalist … I look at these readings metaphorically and try to find in them the truth that speaks to me today about living a life where I can take seriously what I believe Jesus took seriously. So for me, it is not about two men in a field plowing and one of them disappears while the other is left sweating in the heat; or about two women grinding flour and one of them literally vanishes. This is a parable about the choice we face … the choice of becoming an incarnation of God like Jesus became God’s incarnation, or, on the other hand, living a life of fear and insecurity covered up by debauchery, and licentiousness, and reveling, and drunkenness, and quarrelling, and jealousy.

Regardless of which side of the political rift that has occurred during and after this election, if you are sitting in the pew today I don’t think you can justify or condone the racism, xenophobia, or misogyny that has been unleashed in the world around us. The singer and songwriter Chris Kristofferson had a song back in the 70’s that had a line in it that went “everybody's gotta have somebody to look down on” … the song is “Jesus Was a Capricorn” and it goes like this:

Jesus was a Capricorn

He ate organic food

He believed in love and peace

And never wore no shoes

Long hair, beard and sandals

And a funky bunch of friends

Reckon we'd just nail him up

If he came down again

'Cause everybody's gotta have somebody to look down on

Who they can feel better than at any time they please

Someone doin' somethin' dirty decent folks can frown on

If you can't find nobody else, then help yourself to me

Eggheads cussing rednecks cussing

Hippies for their hair

Others laugh at straights who laugh at

Freaks who laugh at squares

Some folks hate the Whites

Who hate the Blacks who hate the Klan

Most of us hate anything that

We don't understand

'Cause everybody's gotta have somebody to look down on

Who they can feel better than at any time they please

Someone doin' somethin' dirty decent folks can frown on

If you can't find nobody else, then help yourself to me

As we begin this Advent season to prepare ourselves for Christmas … The Feast of the Incarnation … we are being called back to the fundamental values of our faith … primarily replacing fear and insecurity with love. We are born … just as Jesus was born … as a beloved child of God. As we are loved by God, so we can love others. When we don’t feel loved we live in the insecurity of our worth as a human being … and the only way to justify our worthiness is by somehow feeling better than another. That is the fear that causes people to push away another person because of their skin color or religion or immigrant status or sexual or gender orientation or ideology, or politics. It is our fear of those that we really don’t know that leads us to assumptions about what they’re like because of how they look or sound or even who they vote for.

Love, on the other, hand acknowledges each person as another child of God. Remember, this kind of love is not undemanding, it does not mean passive agreement, but it does mean acknowledging that each and every human person deserves to belong, to participate, to contribute and to succeed in our world today.

If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously … if we are going to celebrate God coming alive in Jesus in more than just a nod of the head … if we are going to be an incarnation of God ourselves … than this Advent is our time to prepare for that in our own personal lives. We are beloved children of God … and so is each and every other person on this planet. We are God’s incarnation when we live our lives with that truth as a primary element of our values and faith. This Advent is a time to remind ourselves of those values … to bring them to the fore … so that at Christmas we can honestly celebrate not just the birth of a baby Jesus, but the Incarnation that God gave to the world through him.

Amen.