

Advent III Year A 2025

I wonder a lot these days if the church makes a difference in our world. Do our best efforts, our gilded proclamations, make any difference in the face of tyranny? For millennia tyranny has always been the problem. For us it's in plain sight. What we face in our country is nothing new to the world of nations. We've been taught, propagandized, to believe that somehow we Americans were exempt from the calamitous greed and injustice of empire.... If nothing else, in these dark days of our failing democracy, the bubble of our naivete has been burst. Our grand ideologies fail us. Perhaps, the faith we claim is being called on in a renewed urgency. In the world of instantaneous data, and social media, the troubles of our world seem so very overwhelming... and the question that bedevils us is; 'What shall we ever do in a world broken beyond repair?'

It happened I suppose by accident.... A small thing. Several years ago, one of our unsheltered neighbors showed up at our parish breakfast on Sunday morning. Someone here invited him to come in and join us. A few Sundays later two people came; then three... Now we have some thirty to fifty folks who join us for breakfast and fellowship every Sunday morning. Most of these folks are homeless. I'm certain some are addicts. Some have stolen from us... and yet at that hour they are filled with gratitude. If you ask any one of them how they are doing, to a person they will say they are blessed. I don't want to romanticize the poor, nor am I saying 'hey look at us.' I'm just observing that welcome and dignity matter. That community, even in a moment, is redemptive. In the

grand scheme of things welcome and dignity matter most. Salvation is well-being and dignity; even if in a moment.

There is a great mystery here.... These are the present-day outcasts of our world; shame their constant companion; and to welcome them at our table is to be in the presence of God; a God who does not judge, but a God who gives life, and hope, and dignity to those whom the world casts out. We are witnesses to Love's alchemy.... It is love that transforms fear and despair into courage and hope.... It is love that transforms shame into dignity.... It is love that binds us together as a community able to bear each other's wounds so that the weight is not so great... it is love that can apprehend joy even in dire circumstances; and it is love that engenders praise... praise being our principal occupation.

"Go tell John what you hear and see," Jesus tells John's disciples... John has asked the question from prison, as to whether his prophecy about Jesus is true.... Is he indeed the one to usher in God's new age? ...John is on death row. His ministry is over... and what shall become of the Cause? ...what shall become of the resistance against injustice and violence... the mission of healing and inclusion and embrace, the call to wake up? ...and of course Jesus gives him the answer that he already knows... Matthew the writer being rhetorical here.... What do you hear and see? "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised... the poor have good news brought to them." The kingdom of God is arriving, Jesus tells John's emissaries. Rome will be Rome;

but here, and now, the world is being transformed.... The kingdom of God doesn't come from the seats of power, nor from the noblesse oblige of the elite... from the top down as it were... the kingdom of God comes from the margins... in comes in the desert, in the wilderness; it comes in the prisons, it comes in the hospital wards, in the projects.... The kingdom of God comes among the least, comes from among the outcasts of our world.... It is from the margins that God's work is being done.... It is from the least of our world through whom God speaks.... If we think this coming, this Advent, will come from our soft self-satisfaction, we will wait forever.... Do not look to our bright and shiny self-sufficiency for God's coming.... The light of the world is begotten of the dark.... The healing of our world begins among the wounded from the streets. Love begins amid the ruins.

Jesus' admonition to us in the prologue of this gospel is to keep awake... and by that he means to keep awake to where God is already appearing... keep awake to where God is already showing up.... And God is showing up wherever there are wounds, wherever there is despair, wherever there is suffering and pain.... If you want to find God; if you want to find out what God is doing in the world.... Just see and hear that the dead of our world... the sick and the poor, the lost and the shamed... are being raised up to dignity, healing, and joy... and the love that is engendered there will change everything... from the proverbial bottom to top.... It is an irony, a paradox, a mystery that is real and alive... But brothers and sisters if we want to see it, experience it, then it is to these outlying places we must go.... And it is the people who languish there whom we must

embrace. From whom there is a word. We now are the anointed ones who are to come. There is no other. We are the raised body of Christ who are to make good God's promises of a life of dignity and abundance where there is shame and squalor.

If we are paying attention.... If our hearts' desire is to see God... we will know beyond our doubts and post-modern skepticism that God's coming has already begun... that the kingdom is already taking shape, despite the malignant forces that oppose it... that joy in a mortal world falling apart is not only possible, but present... That is the privilege offered to us as the baptized.... Not just to see and hear of God's coming but to participate in it, and to share in the joy of it.

I think of the things that happen here; small things: our intentional relationship with Bethel AME, sharing our lives with each other from across the racial divide, a divide that has so crippled our culture. Seeing each other as sisters and brothers. I remember the vigil we held against gun violence a few years ago in which we saw and heard of the pain spoken by people who had lost loved ones caused by our senseless obsession with firearms.... And yet, wounded souls improbably filled with hope; Our partnering with Leinkauf School to lift up and empower at risk children. Our food share program in which, not only do we provide groceries, but we offer friendship and welcome to those who live in poverty. Our involvement with Gulf Coast Creation Care, and our Green Team seeking to raise awareness of environmental matters and climate change, the adverse effects of which affect the poor and marginalized first. Our advocacy for the least among us in this

city. These may seem small, but they are not small. They are the outward and visible signs of God's reign breaking into our world as we speak. They are signs of God's waking dream for the world.... And there are others, unlikely allies, people of conscience and kindness who serve this waking dream. They are everywhere.

What do you see and hear? I propose that Matthew is speaking of the human imagination, that is to say, the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are to visualize, see and hear what God's dream is for the world. What does a just society look like? Imagine. What does it look like to raise up the poor? Imagine. How is it that we are a healing presence in the world? We dream with the imaginative passion of God with which we are endowed, until in our waking, and our enlightened action, we find that the dream is coming true. God's coming is contingent on our imaginings of God's coming.

Baptism is the initiation into such a life. We are initiated into the nurture of the church. Our imaginations are nurtured by word and sacrament. We hear read the sacred lore of our tradition whereby we re-imagine God's dream, God's project for the world in our own context. We break bread together as a sign of solidarity, as a community of equals. All partake of the bread and the cup... all are blessed, broken and given as nurture for the world. And we learn to pay attention to our world; to pay attention to God's voice spoken from the least and the lost among us. We learn of the authority of the poor and the shamed to call us to our true humanity. And we go into those places where there is pain and death, where there is shame and ugliness, and even danger.... We go there

bearing God's love that is alive... and redemptive.... It is work. It takes courage. But such is our noble vocation, brothers and sisters.... It is for the broken that we live.... And it is the broken, irony upon irony, who will give us the vision of the true God alive among us... We are dreamers, good people, we are curators of a vision of the blind receiving their sight; the lame walking; the lepers cleansed; the deaf hearing; the dead being raised; and the poor receiving the good news... that is the way the world is renewed, becoming, here and now.... If we would but see and hear.