

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

As the years of my life go by, I've become more and more aware of the weirdness of the week of Thanksgiving. This is due in large part to the insanity of "Black Friday," and the hype and buildup for Christmas shopping and decorating that now begins around Halloween. As a culture, we no longer live in the here and now—we live in the future, always looking forward to the next thing, whether it's a holiday, or anything else we might be excited about. And we live in the land of "more is better." Before long we're going to be like a cat chasing her tail, a blur of fur and teeth that makes no sense at all. Well...that should give you a clue about how I'm feeling about this holiday season. And while I know there are some of you who disagree with me, let me just say that I think it's disturbing that we've barely eaten the last bite of Thanksgiving turkey and dressing before we rush out the door to begin celebrating Christmas.

Listen to this excerpt from a friend's Facebook post about her Thanksgiving night shopping trip to a Wal-Mart store in another state: "BLACK FRIDAY?" she writes. "Nah. I'm good! We went last night. My strategy was no crowds. People were courteous, but OMG, you couldn't move through the aisles. All the way home, I whimpered "Never, never, never, never again!" We got there at 4:30 p.m. The big items went on at six. There were no shopping carts. None. NOTTA. Not one. Not in the store. Not in the parking lot. People had gotten there hours earlier, and filled their carts like towers. They couldn't check out till six p.m., or had to pay full price. So they huddled around their carts like homeless people. All the rolling garbage cans were pulled off the shelves and filled as carts. And big Rubbermaid tubs were all through the store as "base camps" with families stacking their goodies in them. At six, when people started checking out, I watched buggy after buggy hit the door sill on the exit door and catapult packages off their towering carts. I think they needed to get a running start, like Harry Potter getting on the train..."

And it wasn't even Advent yet! Like some of you, I didn't see the season of Advent on my personal radar before I came to the Episcopal Church. In one respect Advent is to Christmas as Lent and Holy Week are to Easter. To be more specific, the observance of Advent makes our celebration of Christmas more rich and joyful than it would be without it. But let's be clear: Advent and Lent are two very different, distinct seasons in the church year. Lent is about repentance and penitence. Advent is about waiting and preparation—*not* about preparation of our homes, and certainly *not* about preparation for the biggest gift-giving day of the year—but about preparing our hearts and spirits to receive both baby Jesus and the Risen Christ, who will someday come again.

We mark this season of Advent with changes in our normal worship. Our liturgy, that is, the words we speak in prayer and in praise are different. The Alleluias are gone for a time. Our Gospel lessons shift from one evangelist to another—this year from Matthew to Mark—and we begin our service by lighting candles on the Advent wreath. And of course we have to wait until Christmas Eve to sing the hymns and carols that seem to magically open our hearts to the awe and wonder of it all. It's just not time for that yet. Now is our time to beware, to keep alert, to keep awake—to be vigilant—as Jesus reminds us in today's Gospel passage.

According to Merriam Webster, vigilant means "alertly watchful, especially to avoid danger." Keep alert, keep awake, beware, be vigilant—all of these seem contradictory to our twenty-first century lifestyles. How do we keep alert when our minds and hands and bodies are multi-tasking? How can we keep awake, when we are exhausted from running hard morning to night to be everywhere we need to be and do everything we need to do? How can we beware when we are distracted and manipulated by voices that tell us we need to have more, we can do more, we can be more?

Every age is unique, and of course ours is no different. But when we look at today's scriptures, we can also see similarities. Begin with our passage from Isaiah. There's sadness in this passage that we can understand, in the dramatic expressions of God's presence contrasted with God's absence. "You were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed...There is no one who calls on your name or attempts to take hold of you." Sometimes it seems that we leave God out of our world, a world where we are so inwardly focused that we see events and situations only as they affect our own lives, not as they affect the world, and certainly not as they are seen by God.

I cannot stand in this pulpit today without mentioning Ferguson, Missouri. Regardless of who was right and who was wrong—and none of us has all the facts—it is a striking reminder that the civil rights movement of fifty years ago didn't accomplish nearly as much as we thought it did, as we hoped it had. As long as we live in a world that denies justice and equal rights to *anyone* on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, age, weight, or any other God-given attribute that makes God's people different from us, we must ask ourselves if this is how God would like for God's people to live. And, of course, it's not only about justice and equality, it's also about caring for hungry and homeless children, about providing adequate medical care for everyone, about ensuring that the least of these is treated as we would treat Christ. As long as we are calling others who are unlike us "they" or "them" we are missing the point of Christ's message. "Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord," Isaiah writes, "and do not remember iniquity forever."

In Advent and at Christmastime, we become so focused on the Christ child, that we forget the second coming which we profess to believe in and expect each time we recite the creeds. John Stendahl wrote that "Advent is a double make-believe that pretends both that we are now waiting for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem and that we really expect the heavens to open and reveal the Messiah 'coming in clouds with great glory.' I cannot help joining Isaiah and Jesus and Paul," he writes, "longing for the heavens to open for justice to come for the living and the dead, for mercy to make right this damned and beloved world. I will not choose indifference or resignation. I want to be among those who watch and hope." And to that I would add, "me, too!" And I do hope that we see it as a future reality, not as a make-believe expectation.

Jesus Christ was born to bring justice to the world, to confront the powers and principalities with God's love and mercy and grace. As we await his second coming, it is up to us to act in his place, to be alert, to beware and to be vigilant—to find Christ in the world as it is, and to show Christ to the world as it is—and as we are. This message, the message of Christ delivered through us, is a message of hope for the future. But we can't wait for the future to deliver it; good news must never wait. In the words of William Frey: "Hope is the melody of the future; faith is the courage to dance to it today."

*Amen and amen.*