

“Stay Tuned for Scenes from Next Week”

Sermon Proper 27B
The Rev. Wendy D. Cliff
St. Stephen’s Belvedere
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[Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17](#)
[Psalm 127](#)
[Hebrews 9:24-28](#)
[Mark 12:38-44](#)

“Stay tuned for scenes from next week’s episode.” You know that line at the end of a weekly television show? I record some television shows so I can watch later when I have more time, but I also do it so I can fast forward through the commercials. But that fast forwarding always gets tricky at the end of the episode when I try to grab that last 30 seconds to see scenes for the next week. It takes real effort to watch scenes for next week’s episodes.

As it turns out, our scripture readings for today are actually previews for upcoming episodes, but they’re not too hard to grab. They all hint at the fact that Advent and Christmas are just around the corner. In the reading from Ruth, we see the royal bloodline laid out – Ruth bears a son who will be the grandfather of David, the bloodline through which we trace Jesus’ ancestry. We are starting to see Jesus’ birth on the horizon. And in our collect and the reading from Hebrews, the writer talks about Jesus’ death and the second coming. The second coming is a major theme of Advent, not the birth story. These are actually echoes of last week’s reading from Revelation that talked about Jesus being the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end; the source and the destination.

So, the seasons are getting ready to change in the church, just like the seasons are changing in our everyday world. Last weekend, not only did daylight savings end, but the official holiday season began with Halloween and at the same time we launched our annual Thanksgiving food drive with Thanksgiving being only 2½ weeks away. And then this weekend, many of us did our Christmas shopping at the amazing Art Angels Fair. The holidays are here; ready or not.

So how do we reconcile or integrate the church seasons with the seasons we bump up against in our everyday lives? As people of faith, it’s NOT easy. Even though Advent doesn’t begin for another 3 weeks, I’m not going stand silent and let the outside culture take the lead on dictating how we should approach the holidays.

In two of the last parishes where I worked, in early November I would teach a workshop called “Unplug the Christmas Machine.” Parishioners and people from the boarder community would spend four hours on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon going through a process of identifying their priorities for the holidays so that the women wouldn’t have to feel like we call “Christmas Magicians” and the men wouldn’t have to feel like “Christmas Stagehands.” The workshop helped people align their values with their practices. As a memento of the workshop, everyone received a laminated card the size of a credit card [show card] that they could slip into their wallet and see each time they went to buy something. On that card was something called the Christmas Pledge which said: “Believing in the true spirit of Christmas, I commit myself to: remember those people who truly need my gifts; express my love in more direct ways than gifts; examine my holiday activities in the light of my deepest values; be a peacemaker within my circle of family and friends; and rededicate myself to my spiritual growth.” On the back of each card, the workshop participant would customize the second half of a phrase that began with. “Christmas is a time to.....” How would you complete that phrase?

It’s not easy to go against the tide of consumer culture. It takes intentionality and planning and it’s too late if we wait until the first day of Advent on November 29th. We need to give ourselves tools to guide our actions. Some of you might be wishing for this card with the Christmas Pledge, but don’t despair. Look at today’s psalm. You can cut out today’s psalm from your bulletin and place it in your wallet. Why don’t you do that right now? This psalm gives us the perspective we need to enter into the holiday season. “Unless the Lord builds the house, their labor is in vain; Unless the Lord watches over the city, in vain the watchman keeps his vigil; it is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; vain, too, to eat the bread of toil, for God gives to the beloved sleep.” God has things covered; things don’t depend on us. If it’s not about God, we’re fooling ourselves into thinking any of this matters.

And then the psalm takes an abrupt turn and starts talking about children. “Children are a heritage of the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is a gift.” Maybe the writer of this psalm was a parent or grandparent who sat in adoration, watching an infant taking delight in something as simple as a sunbeam. This psalm is calling us to put God first and embrace a sense of wonder and the ability to be in the moment; to get out of our planning mind. The newest tech gadget or talking Elmo is not the ultimate gift. The greatest gifts are people, relationships, and meaningful time together. This psalm is the message we all need at this time of year as the consumer

machine is revving up to full speed. If we can't slow down and notice what's around us and pause long enough to give thanks to God or recognize that God is in charge, then we're missing the whole point.

This is what Jesus is teaching us in today's Gospel. Not only is he clearly telling everyone to turn in their stewardship pledge cards (I kid you not), but he's also telling us to be authentic, to not worry about keeping up appearances and practicing hollow rituals and societal traditions. Instead Jesus is telling us to focus our gaze on those who are vulnerable and really need our help – widows, foster children, the homeless, the hungry, refugees, victims of natural disasters and wars. This story isn't called "The Pompous Priests." No, it's commonly called, "The Widow's Mite." That's where our attention needs to be placed – on people and places that are vulnerable.

Likewise, the reading from Hebrews states that when Christ comes the second time, it's "not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." Isn't that interesting? This isn't a second coming to mete out punishment and damnation. No, it's heralding a time when all people will be one with Christ. When all people will be one with Christ. For me, that fullness of time, that Second Coming when we are all one with Christ will be when the vulnerable are fed and clothed and safe and housed. When innocent children are no longer shot to death on street corners or schools, when 663 million people in the world won't be lacking access to clean drinking water every day, when contracting AIDS won't be a reason to be ostracized in Honduras, when weeping is no more. That's what we should be waiting for and filling up our to do lists to accomplish.

All of you who toiled and lost sleep over Art Angels did so as an extension of your love for this church, your desire to raise money to serve the poor through our outreach ministries, all of which function through a vision of maintaining a parish that gathers people to worship God. Thank you! Take that stance and apply it to the rest of the holiday season. Make the kingdom come: put God first, practice childlike wonder, serve the vulnerable, and the rest will fall into place. There's still time to get ready. There's still time to approach the holidays with our priorities aligned with our deepest values. There's still time.