

Sermon for 29 November 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
First Sunday of Advent/United Methodist Student Sunday
Scriptures: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
“A little cooperation”

Sometimes a sermon title just reaches out and insists to be fitted in, no matter how awkward or even silly.

Mine for today: “A little cooperation,” comes from the early days of our fellow Baltimorean, Nancy Pelosi, the daughter and sister of D’Alessandro mayors, both called “Tommy” : “Tommy” and “Young Tommy,” respectively... from their daughter and sister Nancy becoming Speaker of the House of Representatives. A short newspaper biography of her at the time had the journalist interviewing her grown children (there are five) about what it was like to be her child. They didn’t gush, or criticize their mom; but I do remember one quote they agreed she was known for: “I’m looking for a little cooperation here.”

As the first woman Speaker, who we know can be quite firm, it leaves the emphasis on working ... which is where we are in this hour today.

Suddenly, the lights have dimmed, things are real serious, and we act out solemn circumstances and utter solemn prayers with a focus on light, but not a lot of light, and we hear clear words about what’s going on around us and it’s not pretty ... and what we’re to do about it.

A grim passage from maybe the most quoted Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, starts us out, not with those lovely passages we sing @ the manger Our Gospel for this year has no manger, shepherds, angel choruses ... but with verses from either while the Jews were in exile in Babylon, alone, broken and despairing ... or from just after some of them got back home and found Jerusalem in ruins and those who were there unwelcoming indeed. “We were bad and you hardened our hearts and now we’re hopeless,” the people tell Jahweh. “We’re caught up in our badness. ...helpless.” This is jailhouse talk, AA- language. Yet in spite of all the gloom, the text goes on to appeal to God... which is why it’s been kept.

Psalm 80 gives us a chorus along the same lines. “You who lead Joseph like a flock! Stir up your might and come to save us!”

Then, swooping down centuries, a short snippet of a letter from Paul to one of the first serious gatherings of Jesus-people , probably all of them Jews ...”I give thanks that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for ...our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s not dodging the troubles facing this church, or his arguments with them. Mark’s church may have been wiped out eventually, with the Romans determined to wipe the Jews from the face of the earth, under emperors like Caligula, who insisted on being worshipped like a god ... But Paul’s not stopping there, whatever literally happened...which is why we’ve kept this letter, this scrap of history, too, over the ages.

The key to today is in the passage from the Gospel of Mark. ...our first reading from this book we'll be focusing on all year. Probably the earliest-written of the four Gospels ... spare, rough... the apostles never seems to get it, Jesus is forever saying, "Do you still not understand?" while they argue and compete and ... run off into the night @ the last hour...

This week we begin the ritual of being ready, without really knowing anything ... Advent is the short, four-week season that stands for so much of existence. "How will this work out?" "What if I've chosen wrong?" "How can we ever fix things?" "What IS normal, anyway?"

And I see Nancy's words coming from both directions: The mother, ambitious and career-minded, no nonsense, but still Mother, still talking to her kids like they matter and can get their acts together as they know already how to, having living in this house with her all these years; and the kids, each with his and her special needs, the youngest, the eldest, the clown, the nerd, the beauty, the beast ... each thinking back to her, "I need your help, too."

That's as close as I can come to what God is saying to us now, in Advent, in the dark, in all the chaos we know, without and within: "How about a little cooperation here? You know what you need to know already. I can't straighten it out w/out you." And it's as close as I can pray words for each of us, and for our nation, and the world, and the planet: "How about a little cooperation here? We've got some things started. They haven't blown apart yet ... we even work together some ... How about a little support, God?"

And there the scene fades: Boss far away; watchman @ the door; slaves employed @ all their various tasks.

This is not a time to look for signs, or focus on regrets . That's avoidance. I put a quote on the outside board: "No one has a right to sit down and be hopeless. There's too much work to do." That's Dorothy Day, the great settlement house worker, who also said, "We do not have faith in God if we depend on the atomic bomb."

"A little cooperation. "

The whole set-up is rich for doing good. Love is everything. Coming @ us in all directions.

Let us pray.

"Help us to do what we need to be doing. Help us."

Amen.