

Sermon for 28 November 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
First Sunday of Advent/United Methodist Student Day
Scriptures: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1- 10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

“Be on guard.”

We come to church to hear good news And here the preacher stands up and says, “Watch out! Be on guard!”

What’s this world coming to?!

This is another custom we never followed as Methodists in Texas during the 1930’s, ‘40’s, and ‘50’! It all started when we Protestants started imitating Roman Catholics in the 1960’s...

Now it seems natural to us that the church should have a time every autumn to focus on the dark, and on waiting, on listening, and using some of those many scriptures that focus on such things.

Just four weeks ... but enough to make an impression. Life is ***listening...*** Anybody who doesn’t know that is already ***off-track***. The Jews would never have been able to keep together, or to contribute their customs and teachings, without knowing that and practicing that... Jeremiah the Prophet comforts the enslaved Hebrews in Babylonia with this idea, and with practices of prayer and reflection and fasting and scripture study, and it came to be...

King David ... that leader after the Lord’s own heart, whom the Prophet Samuel realized was the one among all Jesse’s sons who felt such things and could lead people to follow such practices ... gives us our chant, our group song, our psalm for this kind of thing...

In one of the earliest chosen church writings, the Apostle Paul builds on this foundation, writing to the little group he’d just recently organized in the Greek city of Thessalonika. He adds the idea that brings us together this Sunday, and every Sunday: You don’t do this alone. The point of our religion is fellowship. Each one teaching one, learning from another and from the joint energy of bodies moving and speaking, praying and reasoning together ... debating together ... all building on a foundation of individual believing, but joined.

In each of the three years of the lectionary, this first Sunday of Advent has Jesus talking about end-times. Changed beyond anything yet seen. When things go in the final direction; when religion wins out. Luke’s Jesus says this will be within current people’s lifetimes; that right-living folks shouldn’t be afraid, because they’ll be proved right. And.... Here’s where this first

Sunday comes on strong: It won't be a time of just standing and watching. The right-thinking folks will be busy with the right things, and the rest of the world will miss out, by-passed, stunned...

How do we integrate such thinking with what we know and understand and teach our kids? Figuratively get down on your knees right now. Mentally put yourselves in the position of prayer and trust that underlie everything you do already. Talk to yourself like a believer. What's really going on? What will you depend on if Whatever you want to insert as your version of what you read happens every day to someone God help us, every day in Baltimore ...?

Be on guard. There's light and there's dark in our deepest experience every day... This is Advent's point. Walk with this now. Think and pray about this together. Use this precious hour assembled to expand on what we each know ... and imagine ... and work for ... and back away from and learn, little by little, to turn over to God, so that the ordinary times, the seemingly usual facts, start showing their holy side to you ... and you become both more afraid, and more trustful, about EVERYTHING, little by little and bit by bit.

Be on guard. Be on guard for both the bad and the good that surprises us. Miss less, walk more. This is the good news.

This Sunday, in United Methodism, we blend in the practice of study and teaching that plays such a big part of our modern world. Not to WORSHIP learning, but to recognize both its gifts and its limitation. Be thankful, pray for the progress of all society towards better use of things, more honoring of history and nature and of human nature, which we so much abuse and twist towards power-mongering and tribalism ... and which is so rich with creativity and the creation of life and the increase of charity and the common good.

Let us turn to the Litany for this, and say together.....

In all these things, hear our prayer, and thank you for our words together, as well as for our silence ...

In Jesus' name ... be on guard.

Amen.

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