

The First Sunday of Advent Year B
November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
MARK 13:24-37

BUILDING BRIDGES INSTEAD OF WALLS

“Stir up your strength, O LORD, and come to help us,” the Psalmist urgently implores. That prayer could have been written this week, in the midst of the world-wide pandemic, calamitous economic times for millions upon millions, and persistent injustice and racial inequity.

Our faith teaches us that affliction does come in this sinful and broken world, and that God offers us grace, guidance and spiritual power to *persevere* in the midst of it all and to do our best to be, in the prayer attributed to St. Francis, “instruments of God’s peace.” *God’s* peace means not merely an absence of war or a fragile cease-fire, but the Hebrew word *shalom*: justice for *all*, safety and well-being for *all*, loving community for *all*.

St. Paul assured the Christians in First Century Corinth, Greece — and assures us — “*God will strengthen you to the end,*” by which he means T-H-E End, The End of History when, as we will shortly declare in the Nicene Creed, “Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

That is Good News. Christ *will* come again (maybe ten thousand years from now and maybe this afternoon) to end sin and suffering and transform life itself profoundly. The Book of Revelation, written in the midst of great suffering, is a long, complex reflection on this belief and a call to endurance. The best and shortest commentary on Revelation was spoken by a church janitor when he summed it up this way: “**Jesus wins.**”

That’s what we might call today “the view from 30,000 feet,” The Big Picture, which we badly need glimpses of. Heartened by this, now let’s “land the plane,” so to speak, and look around.

As the pandemic worsens even as multiple vaccines, thank God and thank scientists, are *almost* ready to be rolled out, I personally am a little jealous of *bears* right now. I am tempted to want to eat a whole lot (checked that box) and then look for a cosy, socially-distanced cave to *hibernate* in for weeks until somebody comes and tells me to put my mask on again and come out and get my first vaccine shot.

But we’re not bears, and most of us can’t stay in voluntary isolation for weeks. Besides, true *faith* calls people to “keep awake” as Jesus orders us to do in today’s Gospel, to see the

world as it truly is (made good but far short of the glory of God its Creator), to hope for and believe in its final and ultimate transformation by God, and *in the meantime*, as today's great Collect bids us, "to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

Let's look for opportunities to be "instruments of God's peace." It's Advent: peace is one of the four themes of Advent, along with Hope, Joy and Love. I believe that whenever we open a window on an Advent calendar — either a physical Advent calendar or an online one or one in our spiritual imaginations — *God is opening a window for each of us to do something for peace that day in our deeply divided and troubled nation.* Maybe we can each do something by prayer, by phone call, text, email, letter, social media or even (gulp) in person (from six feet away) to strengthen community, including with someone who is politically different from wherever each one of us might be.

We hear often — and statistics confirm this — how more and more Americans live in *ideological* "bubbles" as well as physical ones, more and more often living in communities which go heavily for either "red" or "blue" candidates and curate their contacts (media and people) to reflect their own ideological perspectives. This reduces the sense of a *national community which rallies together* such as we have had in previous crises, such as after 9/11/2001. People can also start to believe the caricatures of people of different ideologies created by those who don't want Americans to live, work and have our being as one nation.

Let's hear the words of the prophet from today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures: O God, "We are the clay and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand...Now consider, we are all your people." ALL people are created in the image of God. Not just people of any particular "tribe," be it ethnic, cultural or political. And we are each "clay" in the hands of God, who can indeed mold us in accordance with God's purposes.

In the First Century *purple* was the color for kings. That color dye was so expensive only royalty could afford it. Let's think of Jesus wearing royal robes as King of Kings wearing purple also to signify today that he is King of those of *all* political persuasions. ALL are priceless children of God. ALL fall short of the glory of Good. ALL are subject to God's judgment. ALL are offered God's grace. ALL are known fully only by God. If we *assume* — well, we know what that does.

A few years back, bracelets marked "WWJD" were popular: "What would Jesus do?" In Luke 6:15 we can read what Jesus did to bring people together under his leadership. His twelve male apostles included Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot. Jews like Matthew who worked as tax collectors for the occupying Romans were viewed as traitors by many Jews and may have needed army protection from...the Zealots, who were Jewish guerrilla warriors dedicated to the violent overthrow of Roman rule. You think *we* have issues in *this* country?

Imagine the first time both Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector gathered with the other apostles around the campfire with Jesus. *Probably* not a "Kumbaya" moment, at least not right away. But in time, *both* of their lives were transformed by Jesus, and neither lifted up a hand against each other, or anyone else.

I have a Doctor of Ministry degree in Congregational Development. I quoted Luke 6:15 in the preface to my thesis, titled, “The Challenge of Ideological Diversity in the Local Congregation: It’s not easy being a ‘Purple’ Church, but it’s worth it.” I studied how four different Episcopal churches reacted to two major controversies in 2003: the American invasion of Iraq and the consecration of Gene Robinson, the first Episcopal bishop to be openly gay at the time of his consecration. One church was in Tucson, Arizona, another was in Charlotte, North Carolina, a third was in Chicago, Illinois and the fourth was the church of which I was then Rector, St. Barnabas, Monmouth Junction, New Jersey.

Building a diverse community is a lot of work. St. Barnabas in 2003 had people who were born in 25 countries on six continents. It included biracial same sex couples *and* people with very traditional views on sexuality, neo-pacifists and people from the Global South who were deeply skeptical of unilateral American military intervention *and* decorated Marine Corps and Army veterans. There were a variety of strongly held views on these two subjects. By the grace of God and with the help of carefully designed discussions and mutual commitment, the community engaged in dialogue and stayed together, in fact in deeper ways. And that ideological diversity made possible mission projects which would have otherwise been impossible.

But of the four congregations I studied, the Hispanic church in Chicago won the prize. When the priest did a liturgy in memory of Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador who was murdered while saying Mass because of his stance on behalf of the poor, Fr. Araica discovered he had former Salvadoran Army officers *and* former Salvadoran guerrillas in his congregation. Some of them, after fighting on opposite sides of a civil war, sang together in the choir.

Never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wondrous things can happen on a smaller scale too.

St. Barnabas had a long and deep relationship with Women Aware, the agency which serves the survivors of domestic violence in Middlesex County. Women Aware would contact the church when residents of the shelter had specific needs, and I would issue an appeal. One Sunday, I announced that a young woman had successfully fled her abuser and safely made it to the shelter while eight months pregnant. She would need all manner of things for her baby.

I assumed I would know what sort of people would respond to that appeal. I was wrong.

After the service, I noticed a parishioner named Dave walking vigorously toward me across the parish hall, with fire in his eyes. I knew that Dave was a single white male Army veteran about 60 years old, with no children. He was a truck driver and listened to country music and conservative Christian talk radio. I braced myself for what I thought would be a speech from him about unwed mothers and the decline of Western Civilization.

He came up to me and exclaimed, “Fr. Hubbard, I want to give a *stroller* to that young lady because *she chose life*.” His eyes were on fire with *love* and *joy*. I stood there for three

seconds with my mouth open and then replied, “Yes, she did, Dave. And what a wonderful thing.” It was wonderful. She did choose life — her own included — by choosing to have her baby and to have him or her in a safe place. There was room in that “inn.”

The next Sunday, I spotted Dave driving his personal pickup truck into the church parking lot with *the best stroller* I have ever seen. It was the “Lexus” of strollers. We delivered it to the shelter for a young, very pregnant, penniless, homeless Black woman who got well-equipped for motherhood by the generosity of many parishioners. Including at least one person I didn’t expect.

We can look for causes that bring a variety of people together, and honor all the different reasons people might have for doing good things. Most of all, never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit.

And, of course, the Holy Spirit works outside of church, too. Pray, listen, then maybe “Friend” someone on Facebook with whom you have significant political differences but some shared non-partisan *connections* or concerns. Or “Like” the non-partisan post of some relative or friend whose partisan posts trouble you. Or give a Christmas gift in their honor to the favorite charity of a family member with very different politics. If we ask God for guidance on this, I predict we will get “soul mail.”

So here’s my final story for today. Before the lock-down last March, I was a regular at the Berkeley Heights YMCA’s exercise room two or three times a week and developed several friendly acquaintanceships with fellow seniors. One connection went deeper, and I *never* would have guessed in advance which one.

Shortly before the 2016 election, I heard her in the gym *screaming* about Hillary Clinton. I thought I’d better give her some space for a while. We kept “happening” to come to the gym at the same time and cautiously started to talk. I learned that she was a Republican, a New Yorker, a Yankee fan and a Jew, and she learned that I’m a Democrat, a native of Boston, a Red Sox fan and a Christian. Enough differences that we eventually laughed about them.

Then, *because* we were willing to be friendly and listen respectfully to each other, we discovered... that we both have sons on the autistic spectrum.

We stopped still and looked at each other in a whole, new, deeper way. Having children with autism is a *bond* which transcends whatever differences we might have. **Shalom.** The peace of God which passes all understanding. Adonai, the LORD, opened “windows” for both of us. We climbed through them, and found a “bridge” to each other.

Let’s look at the purple candle for the First Sunday of Advent, open the window of an Advent calendar, and maybe, by the light of that purple candle we’ll each see a “bridge” under construction or waiting to be built where each of us can meet another child of God in this polarized nation.

“Lord, make us instruments of your peace.”

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