Shepherd by the Sea Church, Gualala

Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 24:36-44

Advent 1A – November 27, 2016

Homily preached by the Rev. Canon Linda S. Taylor

Tomorrow is the nineteenth anniversary of the day I first met the Advent police. I was a brand-new seminarian, and it was the Monday after thanksgiving. We were all gathered in the refectory at CDSP, eating our breakfasts, drinking coffee, trying to prepare ourselves for 8 o’clock classes. All of a sudden, there was the scraping of a chair, and this woman got up and stomped over to the bulletin board. She stood there, for a couple of seconds, hands on hips and frowning, then she reached up and ripped down this poor, pitiful piece of green plastic greenery stuff that had been draped over the top of the bulletin board. She rolled it neatly into a little coil, and then stuffed it in a cabinet where we put things we didn’t know where they went. She stomped back to her seat with the look of a person who has done a distasteful task and done it extremely well. Those of us who were new sat there and said, “What in the world was that?” One of the women in our little group—someone who was wiser in the ways of the world and the church—rolled her eyes and said, “The Advent police have arrived. It’s going to be a long four weeks.”

The Advent police, I’ve learned, are not elected or appointed. They are self-appointed, and their purpose in these four weeks or so of Advent is to make sure that no taint of Christmas mars the holiness of these four weeks of expectancy. Now, to my way of thinking, that’s like saying that a pregnant woman’s washing baby clothes somehow diminishes the birth of the baby. This is a time of expectancy, and to my way of thinking, neither a sprig of mistletoe or a random carol or even a fully decorated 9 foot Christmas tree can diminish this time of waiting—this liminal time—or reduce the glory of Christmas. It can’t be done.

So my theory about the whole Advent police thing is that it’s a scary time. I said it’s a liminal time—it’s a threshold time—it’s at time between what was—the season of Pentecost, when we’re celebrating all of Jesus’ work on this earth—and Christmas, which celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus coming to be with us as skin and bone and muscle. So we have this time—this really strange time of waiting—of transition, and people get kind of edgy and antsy and anxious during transition times. You may have noticed that lately. When we get edgy and antsy and anxious, we tend to want to control things. At least I do. When I’m not sure what’s happening, all of a sudden I establish some rules that will get me through it. I hope you get through it too, but it’s all about me. When I’m getting anxious, it’s about me, and I think that’s what’s happening with the Advent police. And I think that’s what’s happening with a lot of people in our country. A lot of controlling is happening. A lot of people trying to get in there and straighten things out and make sure they go the way they want it to go. Meanwhile, our government is not doing much in the way of governing and hasn’t been for about 20 years now, I think, because our government has been focused on getting elected, and that kind of transition has made us all kind of edgy. All of us have wanted things to be civil again. We’ve wanted government to make sure things happen instead stopping things from happening, instead of working toward an election. But that’s the situation that we’ve found ourselves in, and this edginess has been magnified by the division that’s going on in our country—this division that’s been part of the election process because it’s hard to pick unless you’ve got some real easy choices to make. So people have purposefully divided our country, because it’s easier to argue than it is to put forth a plan that can get us through.

So here we are at the beginning of this time of expectancy—holding our breath, wondering what’s going to happen next—and across the country, people are recognizing that what happens next is up to us. This division that’s happened in our country can only be resolved by us. Nobody else will do it for us. And we, as Christians, are particularly—particularly—held to do that, because the goal of Christians is to make peace—is to bring about reconciliation. That’s how we follow in Jesus’ footsteps. In the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, on page 304, there’s a list of the baptismal promises we make, and one of them is about working for peace and justice and respecting all people in creation. In the Lutheran Book of Worship, we find the Five Gifts of Baptism, which are very similar, and they also speak of bringing peace and justice to this world—striving for peace and justice.

How do we do that? Well, Isaiah says we should keep our focus on the time of peace to come, and that’s a good start. In the letter to the Romans, Paul says we need to live every day according to the teachings of Jesus, and that’s another good point. So, how do we do that? How do we do that? One of the ways we can do that is to learn to listen to each other. To hear one another, because that’s how we get to peace—when we can sit together and relearn disagreement and loving at the same time. We have forgotten how to do that particular multitasking. We have forgotten how to love people and disagree with them at the same time.

So, I have a suggestion for you today. You may have heard of Living Room Conversations. You may not have. They’ve been happening for about three years. It’s the brainchild of Joan Blades, who is the founder of MoveOn.org, which is about as progressive a group of people as you will ever run across, and Mark Meckler, who is one of the founders of Tea Party Patriots—and on the other side of the picture. These two folks, through some little miracle, got together over their common concern for the division that’s happening in this country, and they said, “We have to do something about it.” So they gathered people—their friends, people they trusted, people who have some skills—and they created a format called Living Room Conversations. It’s a format of five sets of questions. The first question is what drew you to this conversation. The second set of questions asks about your values. The third set is about the topic itself—what concerns you have for the country and the world, relating to this topic, which could range anywhere from immigration to what we do now that we have elected a president. The fourth set is about what you’ve learned by listening to one another. Finally, the fifth set asks if there’s something you want to do, now that you’ve listened and understand the other a little bit better.

As I said, they’ve been doing this for about three years. They did some test conversations and found that people were able to talk and listen in a way they had not done in a while, because this format is a safe format. The questions have been vetted by both conservatives and progressives to have no bias, so there’s not a question like “When did you stop beating your wife?” It’s a question about what happened in you when something happened. So, we share our own experience, and when we share our experience and our values, we find a fantastic thing happens: we meet on common ground—because our human experience is not incredibly unique. We all have joy, we have pain, we suffer, we rejoice, we give thanks, we plead—all of these things are part of our experience, and it’s the context that may be different, but when we talk about our own experience, we can meet someone else. We can meet in the middle and stand there together with more understanding.

It’s really simple the way it works. If I disagree with someone—like if Dot and I have a problem together, I can’t see her way, she can’t see my way, and we’re beginning to struggle with our relationship—because that’s what happens. As long as two people are standing side by side looking at something, we get along pretty well. We can problem solve. But when we’ve got that thing—whatever it is—in the middle between us—we begin to be adversarial. So, one of the things that Dot and I could do is create a Living Room Conversation. She would get two people who agree with her, and I would get two people who agree with me—because six is a perfect number for this—and we would meet at her house, and we would go through this format together, and drink tea or coffee or whatever—probably not alcohol—and at the end we would find that not only do we understand each other better, but maybe we’ve got something out here we can do together because we’ve found common ground.

The way it works is really simple. One person talks at a time. We go around in a circle, through these five rounds of questions. One person talks, and everyone else listens. There’s no cross talk. At the end of each round, people can ask clarifying questions, then we go on to the next round. There is such power is hearing someone else—really hearing deeply—and being deeply heard. It’s transformative. It feels miraculous, and I get goose bumps every time I talk about it, because I’ve done about 19 of these conversations at this point. We started out in my diocese, El Camino Real, back in April. There were six of us from the church where I serve most of the time, St. Andrew’s in Saratoga, and we said, “We have to take this home. We have to do that.” So we gathered the first group of people in June, then one in July, August, September, two in October and then another after the election on November 19. We’ve ranged from 30 people down to six. We say we’re doing this and the topic will be such and such, y’all come, and people do. What I’ve found is that people keep coming back. They keep coming back because it feels so good to be in conversation about difficult issues again without being angry. It feels wonderful. So, I commend this to you, and I would love to do this with you—I mean, it’s a long trip from Campbell—but I don’t need to be here, because this is a turnkey program. It’s at LivingRoomConversations.org with all the instructions. You don’t need a facilitator, and that’s why this so different from other peacemaking things that are happening in our country right now. There’s no need for a facilitator because the facilitator is a piece of paper, and all people have to do is show up and do the work that brings us together.

So, in today’s reading from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “Be alert. Keep watch.” I once saw a little sign in an Episcopal church office. It said, “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” Jesus is coming, so we need to *get* busy. We need to do what we’re called to do as Christians, and as we do that, we can know that the God who loves us, and the Christ who walks with us every day, and the Holy Spirit who brings us new life continually will be with us. All we have to do is hold out our hands and accept the love and grace that are offered to us. And for that—in this shaky transitional time—we can say thanks be to God.