

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney

Advent 1

November 28, 2021

“Focus”

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

There's a reason people refer to our nation as the United States of Amnesia. With the instant news cycle, events only a week old may as well have never been. Out of sight, out of mind. That's why political polls this far out are meaningless. We sleepwalk through the days and weeks.

But the call of Advent is to wake up. Focus. Pay attention.

Read, mark and inwardly digest the secular scripture of daily news. That's what God's about in our time. Maybe it's as Octavia Butler said, “God is Change.” The divine within the unfolding of events. That is where God's potential lies.

Let us draw upon our scriptural heritage to see the inbreaking of God's handiwork in it all. The Psalmist understood this, as did the 8th Century BCE prophets – Micah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah. President Lincoln had this grasp of the history he presided over. Draw upon the scriptural heritage for wisdom and guidance to ascertain our duty in such times -- our time. Focus.

That's the call of Advent; for Christ comes and again, and again, to play in a thousand cities and hamlets. Especially the abode of the expectant heart.

It's about reading the signs. No this is not the mysterious divination of the Tarot card reader. It's not in the lines of your palm. No crystal ball required. It's as simple as noting the seasons of a fig tree.

Focus.

I've been told that I've had this problem for some time. My mother never tired of telling the story of coming into my first-grade class to drop something off for me. She looked around but didn't see me anywhere. She then got the teacher's attention, who motioned her over to my seat. She didn't spot me because, while my legs were on my seat, my head was on the floor looking up at the underside of my desk. The rest of the class was working on the numbers paper. Focus, John!

The signs are as basic as noting the changes of the seasons. It's as elementary as knowing how many kids in the third grade are not readers, and then knowing how many prison cells to build. As perilous as standing between a congress critter and the airport on a holiday weekend, as Brian Williams is fond of saying. Elementary, my Dear Watson.

Speaking of signs in the sky, the other night Jai and I stayed awake to watch the eclipse of the moon. It was said that this was the longest partial eclipse to be seen in the last five hundred years, and wouldn't reoccur for another hundred.

As we watched more and more of the moon slip into shadow, I recalled the ancient Philippine myth - the explanation that a monstrous dragon, Bakunawa, was eating the moon. Tearing chunks out of it, bit by bit.

Talk about signs in the heavens! Around one o'clock I gave up watching. Figured the dragon was probably stuffed to the gullet.

Advent is a time of reckoning as we await the birth of the new. It is not escapism. It is not denial. No, we will pass through the tribulation of our days – but not as a people adrift with no hope. We live these days, eyes wide open.

In her recent book, ***Twilight of Democracy***¹, Anne Applebaum warns us of the threats to our democracy. From her perch in Poland, she has noted the parallels between events in that country and the U.S. She notes the weakening of the institutions of democracy after the ascendancy of the so-called Law and Justice Party. Operating every bit as stealthily as our own Right Wing under Trump in the U.S. of A.

Competent government administrators were canned and replaced with hacks solely on the basis of loyalty to the party and a demagogue. Imaginary

¹ Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).

opponents were conjured up: Jews, immigrants, Antifa, whatever. Old friends were seduced by the siren song of order or white supremacy in the U.S.

In her words:

“Today is not 1937. Nevertheless, a paralled transformation is taking place in my own time, both among the thinkers, writers, journalists, and political activists in Poland, a country where I have lived for three decades, as well as in the rest of the societies we have come to call the West.”²

Signs of ominous portents in the liberal democracies of the West. Bites slowly taken out of democratic traditions as if by some fearsome dragon. These are not signs in the heavens but clearly visible for all with eyes to see and minds to understand.

The eclipse of the moon may be a metaphor for the eclipse of democracy here in these United States.

New state voting maps continue the damage done the last election by gerrymandering. Nick Corasaniti, in the NY Times documents the electoral “stranglehold” the Trumpistas have in virtually every swing state.³

“This is not your founding fathers’ gerrymander...This is something more intense and durable and permanent,” he quotes Chris Lamar, counsel for the Campaign Legal Center which monitors such corruption. In these states, for all practical purposes, democracy is defunct. Dead. You can’t out-organize gerrymandering and voter suppression.

With the possibility of flipping any of these districts ruled out for the foreseeable future, Trump was right about one thing, “The system is rigged.” Democracy erodes as if swallowed up by some cosmic malevolent serpent. That serpent is the will to power. Pure power. Nothing else.

It would all seem hopeless. I have friends who have given up. Dropped out. Our future, as a nation, as a planet would seem to be utterly futile – EXCEPT... EXCEPT for one thing – the freedom of God’s Holy Spirit to bend hearts towards something better. To bend our imaginations to a different future. Even within our constricted circumstances, the degrees of freedom for a wholesome outcome are beyond our constricted imagining.

The other day one of my friends discounted our dismal prospects as a society with the flippant, dismissive, “Well of course, you as a pastor are counting on

² Op cit, p. 12.

³ Nick Corasaniti, “Maps Give G.O.P. a Stranglehold in Swing States,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2021.

God to rescue us.” “No,” I answered. I’m counting on the Spirit to enlighten me that I might see the potential for the better in all this.” If we attend prayerfully to the pain and possibility of these days, we will be given the wisdom that is needful. We become, in St. Paul’s words, “cooperators with God.” - In FAITH. That’s what I’m counting on. That’s the miracle I seek. Enlightenment.

Many will experience much pain and disillusionment over the verdict in the Rittenhouse trial. I have feared that the polarization of our people couldn’t be worse. Then it is. White supremacy is tearing chunks out of our constitutional fabric. Swallowing whole our democratic norms and traditions. No crocodile tears here. Just entitlement.

Amber Hikes of the ACLU, reflecting on the seeming victory for white supremacy, urges us to regroup from the struggle. Catch our breath, refocus. Her words could well suffice for some Advent preparation in this “winter of our discontent.” Here is her counsel:

“Hope is a discipline. And it is a discipline that requires our persistent practice, attention, energy, and intention. Hope will fuel our fight but it will not come on its own. If you feel like you don’t have time to process, if you feel like we jump from one crisis to another -- take this time to find your breath. Make restoration your most important task for the week. Do all you can to turn off your email, to log out of your accounts, to refill your cup, to gather back some of that hope.”⁴

Out of Babylonian captivity Jeremiah was able to discern God’s abundance in some very lean years – years of exile. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the House of Israel and the House of Judah.”

Focus, America. Focus on the Promise of what we can become.

Adam Schiff is wont to remind us, “Midnight is the darkest hour of every day everywhere in the world, but it’s also an optimistic time because you know that what follows is filled with light.”

Surely, the days of Light are even now a glint in the eye of our imagination. Soon and very soon, they are arriving and will have arrived. Our time is now. Rise and shine.

Can’t you hear the faint, far off singing of a gathering of God’s messengers? “Peace on earth and to All of goodwill.” A rag-tag melody to a Reggae beat.

So, I say, screw the dragon. And break forth with a mighty chorus of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Come quickly. AND...let’s not forget to light that First Advent Candle, for night is passing. Amen.

⁴ Amber Hikes, Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer, ACLU, “Open Letter,” November 19, 2021.