



St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401

Parish Offices & Education Building
Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone : 410-267-9333
Fax 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org

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The Rev. Madeleine Beard
Advent I

There is a story in the book of Judges about a man named Gideon. Israel and Midian were at war. The Midianites marched on Israel and pitched camp and destroyed the crops, leaving Israel nothing to live on. It was a time of great distress and the people cried out to the Lord for deliverance. One day Gideon was threshing wheat inside a wine-press to hide the wheat from the Midian army. The angel of God came to him and said that God was sending Gideon to lead the army of Israel and that they would prevail. After several battles, so it was. Gideon and the Israelites prevailed over the army of Midian.

Gideon could read the signs of the times.

Many, many years later, there was a man named Jeremiah. He warned the king and the rulers of Judah of God's displeasure, denouncing their idolatry and the superficiality of their worship. After Babylon defeated Egypt, Jeremiah knew Judah also would be conquered, that its days were numbered. So it was. Jerusalem fell and the king and the people were taken into captivity.

Jeremiah could read the signs of the times.

Today's Gospel takes up where we left off two weeks ago; except, because we are beginning a new church year, we are reading from Matthew instead of Luke. We are in the middle of the long teaching session Jesus began in response to his disciples marveling over the beauty and majesty of the Temple.

It is the last week of Jesus' life and it is his last opportunity to bring his disciples to some comprehension of what sort of Messiah he is and what sort of kingdom he is ushering in.

There already are kingdoms in place. In Galilee there is the Roman installed kingdom of Herod and in Judea there is the empire of Rome itself. The Romans have occupied Judea for over 60 years. Imagine what life is like for the people of Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee. Imagine what life is like for the disciples, for Jesus. They stand in the shadow of Herod's great Temple with its courts and columns and gates and they dream of freedom. Jesus is well aware of the people's desire to be free, to be rid of the occupiers, to be safe in their homes, to be secure when they worship, not worrying about the Romans putting a statue of Caesar in the sanctuary or withholding the High Priest's robe. He knows that the time is coming when the people will say, "No more!" He also knows that Rome will never allow this.

Jesus could read the signs of the times.

Knowing something will happen doesn't mean knowing when it will happen. Gideon knew that eventually the army of Israel would meet the army of Midian, but not when or who would be the leader.

Jeremiah knew that an alliance with Egypt was no guarantee of safety and that Babylon was coming, just not precisely when. Jesus knows

that an uprising against Rome will come and will fail, but he doesn't know when it will happen. We know he doesn't know because he says, "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

But wait, you say, he is God...he knows all. Not so. Paul describes God's emptying himself of God – of omniscience, of omnipotence – of the attributes of God – to be the incarnate one. Jesus is truly human. So his knowledge of the future is no greater than Gideon's or Jeremiah's.

Jesus says there will be a time when the Temple will be no more. He says there will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be lawlessness and love will be lacking. The kingdom of Rome will seem to prevail, making a desert of Judea and calling it peace. But in the end, the kingdom that will prevail will be the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God will transfigure the earth and bring true peace through justice. The true peace will come not with armies but with nations beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and learning war no more.

The Kingdom of God will come and the earth will be renewed. But the hour of the kingdom Jesus doesn't know. Only God knows when it will come. Jesus only knows that it will come.

The teaching session continues. He goes on and refers to the flood, when Noah was prepared but everyone else was too caught up in daily living to take notice of the rain and about two men working in a field and the other about two women grinding grain. One of each pair will

be taken, swept away by the flood, and the other left. Don't be confused by the "Left Behind" books. The ones left are the lucky ones.

The imperial, occupying kingdom of Rome rules Judea and Galilee. Its armies march along the roads, imposing taxes, impoverishing the people. It is the Roman armies who do the taking, just as the Midianite army seized the wheat and the Babylonian army dragged the people into captivity.

Imagine an army, booted feet marching up to your door, soldiers forcing their way into your home, "taking" you away. This is not a Rapture, bumper sticker "this car will be unmanned" moment, but a terrifying moment with very real loss of freedom and probably life. It is not a theological concept, drawn from some reading of Scripture, from Matthew or Paul's 2nd letter to the Thessalonians. It is a real time event, one that happened in the 1st century and still happens in the 21st century everyday somewhere in the world. No one wants to be taken; everyone wants to be left.

The question is, "Left for what?" What are the disciples left to do?

We didn't read them today, but Jesus continues his teaching with parables. The first is of a conscientious steward who, in the absence of his master, feeds and cares for the master's household. He is contrasted with a second steward who wastes his master's resources, eating and drinking until drunk, and who abuses those entrusted to him.

The second is of the ten girls, bridesmaids, five of whom bring lamps and oil when waiting for the bridegroom and five of whom bring only lamps. When the bridegroom arrives, only the five who are prepared are there to greet him and light his way. The others, the unprepared, are locked out of the wedding feast.

The third is the parable of the talents. A rich man entrusts three servants with money. Two invest wisely and increase the wealth given them. The third digs a hole and hides the money, fearful of losing any of it. The first two are praised and the third condemned.

What are the disciples left to do?

Obviously they are to be good stewards, wisely using the resources given them, caring for those entrusted to them, and prepared for what will come. But is that all? Is there more they are left to do?

It is the parable at the end of the teaching that is definitive. In the Heavenly Court, the King separates his people by how they fed him when he was hungry, gave him water when he was thirsty, welcomed him when he was a stranger, clothed him when he was naked, visited him when he was sick, and called on him when he was in prison. They protest that he is the king – he was never hungry, naked, thirsty, a stranger, sick, or in prison – he is the king and his criteria are unjust. But he replies that when they encountered others who were sick, hungry, thirsty, naked, strangers, or imprisoned and cared for them, they cared for him. And when they did not care for them, they did not care for him.

Now they know. Now the disciples know what they are left to do. Yes, they are to be good stewards and they are to care for each other. But they are also to care for others – the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger. They are to be the hands of Christ in the world and to the world. They are to live according to the commandments given them – to love God with heart, soul, and mind and to love their neighbor as themselves.

It is Advent, the time of waiting, of watching, of preparation, of remembering.

Like the disciples, we too ask, "What will come, Lord? What are the signs?" Like the disciples, we are answered, 'Wait, keep alert, and while you wait, be sure you are left to care to each other and for others."

The signs of our times are not the same as the signs Jesus, the disciples and the early church were reading. But our times are as perilous and the signs are all about us.

Unlike then, there is no Roman army coming to take us, but we can be taken. We can be taken by quarrelling and jealousy, by strife and anger, by dissensions and factions. We can be taken by false doctrine, heresy, and schism. These armies keep us from caring for, from loving each other.

We can be taken by what Paul calls powers and principalities. Not enemies like Midian, conquerors like Babylon, or empires like Rome.

Instead, in the words of Walter Wink, the powers are “the entrenched background assumptions of people who rule and speak for us, the intractable perversities of institutional policy, the invisible blind spots in even our own well-considered opinions.” These armies keep us from caring for, from loving others.

But we are made in the image of God. Made in His image, we are to be imitators of God, his beloved children, living in love as Christ loved us.

Advent is the time to wait, to watch, to prepare, and to remember, to remember that we want to be left, left to be the hands of Christ in the world and to the world until he comes again. Amen.