Invitation to the Table

Advent reminds us that we did not come to God; God came to us. God is determined to be in communion with fractured, distant humanity.

On this Peace Sunday, the Lectionary Epistle reading is from Romans. Paul wrote, *"May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."*

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.

Our Communion Hymn is #408, "Come, Share the Lord"

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"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread." (I Corinthians 10:16-17) Let us Pray:

"Come Share the Lord."

Pastoral Prayer

- Atty
- Dennis
- Dick
- Sherry (Jerry Book)
- Congregational Meeting next Sunday

Self-revealing God, we have come here this morning hoping to see you, yearning for evidence of your presence among us. Sometimes it seems to us that the world is in the tight grip of forces over which we have no control. We often feel as if we are ruled by powers which are alien to your will and your way, but which we can do nothing to change.

Therefore, we pray this Advent that you would give us the imagination, the courage, to see your reign breaking in among us. Dissolve our narrow notions of what can and what cannot be done. Give us that sure hope rooted in our conviction that you are God, that you have not left your world to itself, and that you will not let us go until you have perfected what you began in creation—that the wolf shall live with the lamb, the calf and the lion shall live together, and a little child shall lead them. Enable us to believe that, with your presence and help, we can make that happen—in ourselves, and in our world. Amen.

A New King

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 (NRSVUE)

1 *Give the king your justice, O God,*
and your righteousness to a king's son.
2 *May he judge your people with righteousness*
and your poor with justice.
3 *May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,*
and the hills, in righteousness.
4 *May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,*
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.
5 *May he live while the sun endures*
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
6 *May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,*
like showers that water the earth.
7 *In his days may righteousness flourish*
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

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18 *Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,*
who alone does wondrous things.
19 *Blessed be his glorious name forever;*
may his glory fill the whole earth.
Amen and Amen.

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Folks, I have serious issues with the power-and-control focus in the marriage of evangelical Christianity and government. I have no serious issues with evangelical Christianity—I disagree with them on a number of theological points; but disagreement, if handled maturely, can lead to new understandings; and understanding is the first step toward unity; but remember, unity is not uniformity. My concern is two-fold: (1) they don't allow disagreement (That's the unpardonable sin!) and (2) the ill-advised and historically disastrous marriage of religion and government.

Their claim that we are a "Christian Nation" is a knee-jerk litmus test. But there are more than 41,000 Christian denominations globally; so, which Christianity? Southern Baptist? Catholic? Presbyterian? Disciples of Christ?

The issue that gives me heart palpitations is Christian Nationalism. Christian Nationalism is not Christian activism. Christian Nationalism is not Christian patriotism. Patriotism is about loving country and giving of oneself on behalf of country; Christian Nationalism is about domination of country.

When Christian Nationalists say America is a Christian nation, they don't mean black Christianity; they don't mean Asian Christianity or Latino Christianity. They don't mean mainline Protestant Christianity, and they for sure don't mean Catholic Christianity. They mean European, white evangelical Christianity.

The Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution compiled a list of statements that characterized Christian Nationalism and condensed the list to five. Then they surveyed more than 6,000 random Americans, asking if they agreed or disagreed with those five statements. Here are the statements:

- The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation.
- U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.
- If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore.

- Being Christian is an important part of being truly American.
- God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Those who said, "Yes" to those questions were predominantly white evangelical Protestants and represented the political right. Multiple surveys over the past several years indicate about two-thirds of white evangelical Christians qualify as either adherents or sympathizers of Christian nationalism.

But see, here's the contradiction: Christian nationalism wants the government to enforce their version of Christianity on the whole country, and Christianity was never intended to be inflicted or enforced. It has to be freely chosen, or it's not Christianity. Plus, government enforcement or establishment of any religious system is clearly forbidden by the 1st amendment of the US Constitution. Nor has such a combination of religion and state ever endured in human history.

All of which really complicates our grasp of today's lectionary readings, because all four texts present a vision of hope and peace, each presented in political imagery—not "spiritualized" to become irrelevant to the realities of earthly life. The language is political: the Peaceable Kingdom, the Beloved Community in which God's Shalom replaces the injustice perpetrated by the powerful and privileged.

Advent is a time of anticipating the impossible possibility that the partnership of humanity and divinity will create a new kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Advent invites us to wait but also to be catalysts for the changes that are promised. We are not passive recipients; we are partners in God's work of grace: creating, redeeming, and sustaining life in Shalom.

Shalom. Peace. The word is as ancient as the land of Israel. It's used 237 times in Hebrew Scripture, embedded in familiar names of cities like Jeru-salem (foundation of peace) and names like Solom-on (peaceful.)

Shalom is a common Jewish greeting, something like, 'peace be with you;' but it projects a deeper meaning more along the lines of, "may you be filled with a complete and perfect well-being" or "may health, prosperity, and peace of mind and spirit be upon you." The word suggests not just an absence of violence or strife, but a positive presence of fullness and completeness, overflowing inner and outer joy and serenity.

Shalom, in Greek, is Eirene (ειρήνη). It appears 92 times in the New Testament, and Jesus used it to describe his kingdom—the one of which he taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Isaiah 11, which includes our "Call to Worship" this morning, describes that impossible possibility – enemies becoming companions, children safe from harm, humanity and non-humans living side by side peacefully in a world without war. None of this has ever happened, despite Isaiah's dream, but that dream still judges

world history and serves as the polar star for our calling as children of God.

And as unrealistic as Isaiah's dream may seem, Psalm 72 echoes it. It's one of ten "Royal Psalms" in Hebrew Scripture, each of which celebrates a sitting king. It likely was recited at some festive occasion like the coronation of a new king. It is a prayer, and tradition holds that its opening lines refer to David's son, Solomon: ***"Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son."***

The underlying idea is that the king lives under the watchful eye of God and if he rules with justice and righteousness, the troubles of the poor will cease, and all God's people will prosper. Of the ten royal psalms, 72 dwells most directly on the king's duty to befriend the poor. It summarizes a consistent biblical theme that God has a special concern for the poor and marginalized, and people of faith are called to care for them through acts of compassion and justice. Oppressing the poor is seen as an insult to God, while showing mercy to them is a way to honor God.

The psalmist prays for royal leadership that will strive for God's righteousness, justice, and shalom—in personal lives as well as the body politic. These words are repeated over and over in the Psalm:

- Righteousness: an orientation of the heart that yearns for the presence of honesty, gentleness, truth, and compassion within the human community.
- Justice: the actualization of those qualities within the community.
- Shalom: the harmony and unity that result from the presence of justice.

In Advent, these political expectations once directed at the Davidic kings become for the church the hope for the salvation vested in the one Davidic King, Jesus Christ, and the qualities stressed repeatedly through today's reading from Psalm 72 stand at the center of that hope. These qualities: righteousness, justice, and shalom, are characteristics not just of the person of the King, but also of life within the kingdom—qualities by which citizens of the kingdom shape their hearts and conduct their affairs.

A new king makes a new world possible. Advent is a time of pondering how we will bring our present lives into synch with the intentions and expectations of God as revealed the New King, and how we will announce those intentions and expectations. For while we humans await the birth of a new King, God expects that men and women will respond by building their lives around the qualities the new King comes to proclaim.

If we fail to do so, we wait for some king other than Jesus.[1]

Pray with me.

[1] Beginning with the bullet points above, the content is paraphrased and adapted from Walter Brueggemann, in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p. 14.