

Message: Follow the King

“If you don’t know where you are from – you’ll have a hard time knowing where you are going.”¹ That wisdom comes from Enuma Okoro, who reminds us that good opportunities to learn and grow come when cultures collide. Advent and the holiday season are certainly a collision, separated by Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is a remarkable time. It’s a unique celebration, a time when we gather to remember and be grateful for what we have been given. We gather to remember where we came from. No matter whether we’re rich or poor, all of us are blessed by God. People open their homes to others. Some people get up early, prepare a meal and feed hundreds of other people. I know two nearby United Methodist Churches – Chino UMC and St Paul’s UMC in San Bernardino, who serve up to 1,200 Thanksgiving meals to anyone who is hungry. Praise God!

Here are some beautiful and important words from United Methodist Bishop Karen Oliveto about the collision:

“I find it interesting that Thanksgiving, a secular holiday, is one of the least commercialized. Christmas has been turned into a shopping frenzy, with little mention of an inn that has no room for the Christ Child. Easter has become literally sugar-coated with chocolate bunnies and jelly beans, a far cry from celebrating the resurrection.

But then there’s Thanksgiving. Let’s face it, marketing turkeys just isn’t very sexy. But it’s more than that, you can’t manufacture and sell gratitude.

Gratitude is not forced optimism, a denial of real pain and loss, the power of positive thinking, or a focus on the good things in life. It is a posture and a prayer.

Albert Einstein once said, ‘There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.’

¹ Enuma Okoro, 2015 Spiritual Formation Conference

Thanksgiving invites us to live our lives as if everything is a miracle:

The sky as dusk descends

The birth of a child

The community that comes together when there is a loss

The taste and texture of a perfectly ripened fruit

People helping people

The abundance that is revealed when we share

The amount of light a single candle gives off in the darkness

The opening of one's heart to love after it has been broken

A warm bed on a cold night.

Thanksgiving invites us to remember the miracles that are waiting to be discovered in each and every day we are given, and to uncurl our fist and open our hearts to accept them with gratitude."

Those last words are powerful: "Thanksgiving invites us to remember the miracles [of life] ... and to uncurl our fist and open our hearts..."²

I think Jesus would approve. After all, Jesus is coming again. He will return to unite all nations and people as one in the new heaven and new earth. The heavens will shout, "*Look! God's dwelling is here with humanity. He will [live] with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God*" (Revelation 21:2).

Jesus promised to return saying, "*Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. You know the way to the place I'm going*" (John 14:1-4).

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. That's why his call "*Follow me*" is so powerful (John 21:19). It has the power to change lives. One voice we hear through the web site "Voice of the Addict" says this:

"I am a recovering addict. I've suffered through 26 years as a drug addict, the last 17 years on heroin. I've lost everything I ever had due to my drug use but mostly I lost myself and my self-respect. I've been in prison 4 times as a result of my addiction and it wasn't until I gave my

² *Ibid*

life to Jesus Christ that I finally found some hope. I've only been clean for a little over a year now and I know there are no guarantees, but I know that as long as I remain close to God and keep Him first, I will never have to return to the HORROR I once lived. *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Philippians 4:13).

Vicki, the author of the web site wrote this:

Yes, the letter above was written by my brother, my baby brother, whom I dearly love. He was clean and eager to stay that way when he wrote the letter, but that was several years ago. He didn't make it though, and he went back to prison. But today, by the grace of God, he's out of prison and doing well. ‘One day at a time.’”³

The invitation of Advent includes silence. We have moments of silence in prayer, reflection and gratitude for all God has done. But Jesus calls us to go beyond our own interests, to consider the needs of others. Many of them are silent. It's hard to find time during the busy holiday season to stop, listen and reflect, but Jesus asks us to do so.

We have to listen clearly to hear the silent voices of those:

Suffering from abuse – at home, school or work
 Who are shamed because they aren't like others
 On the streets with little hope for change in their situation
 In prison
 Who are hungry and don't have food to eat
 Helplessly watching their children die from poverty or disease
 Confined to a bed or a room
 Persecuted for their faith, the color of their skin, their gender or their sexual orientation

Today, let's raise our voices for those who are silenced. Let's raise them up boldly in all times and places. In many languages, nations and traditions, let's proclaim, “Christ is King!”

“Saying Christ is King isn't a declaration that places one nation over another. And it never should be. We can't support force and violence over others. Jesus' kingdom is nothing like that. Today's reading from Ezekiel reminds earthly rulers what God truly requires:

³ http://www.mothersofaddicts.com/Voice_Of_The_Addict.htm

gathering and caring for those who are oppressed, seeking justice and peace with compassion.

The King God wants us to see, the King Jesus was and is, is a shepherd. And not just any shepherd. Jesus is a shepherd whose flock has been scattered by the actions of leaders and rulers, religious and otherwise. And this shepherd is, ‘fixing to do something about it.’ Jesus the shepherd is one who goes looking for the scattered sheep, wherever they’ve been abandoned or wandered. He cares for their wounds, and, when it’s time, carries them back to a safe place where they can find healing.

Here’s the part we may not like, but need to know: this shepherd takes sides. Jesus the shepherd will choose to ignore or even destroy those who have prospered at the expense of others. Those who injured and scattered, those who push or shove the others out of the way to get the best for themselves, those who make themselves strong on the backs of those who are weaker; these are the ones God will set aside and ignore. For they make those who are weak even weaker. Jesus the shepherd has no interest in preserving those who take advantage, who flaunt privilege. They take and consume resources for themselves and their own purposes that were intended to be made available for the good of all. If they survive at all, it will be without the help of this shepherd.

Jesus the shepherd sides with the weak, the outcast, the damaged, the diseased, the abandoned and the marginalized.

Jesus the shepherd spends time *with* them, caring *for* them, and not with or for the benefit of the privileged ones. Jesus is Christ the King, and this is the way his kingdom works. The weak, outcast, damaged, diseased, abandoned and marginalized people – they’re the saints Jesus tends.

Ezekiel paints that picture for us. Jesus tells us himself. Matthew 25 lays it out explicitly. Jesus gives his disciples and all who listen a stunning picture of what will happen. He clearly identifies who the righteous sheep are. They’re the ones whose story is of ultimate salvation, the ones whose whole lives are marked by thanksgiving. They live their lives doing what Jesus said we are to do, *‘I tell you, just as you*

did it to one of the least of these - those in prison, or sick, or alien, or hungry, or naked, or thirsty - you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40).

This is Christ the King, the King of Love, our Shepherd.

If we're his, we admit who we are and what we've done. We're weak, not self-sufficient. We're outcasts in one way or another, little as we may want to admit it to ourselves. We're damaged, and, in our damage, we've probably damaged others. We're corrupted, riddled with wrongdoing. Some of the sin we caught from others, some we carry to others. We're abandoned - even abandoned by Christ if we try to live out of whatever privilege we've been allowed to have or have taken for ourselves. We're marginalized, because in the end there is no center in this world where anyone can stay for long. All things change.

If you don't want to be found lacking by the Shepherd who seeks out all who are 'negative,' be strong. If you're convinced you're not like them and want nothing to do with them, just keep it up. Be self-sufficient. Take what you believe is yours. Enjoy your privilege and ignore the cries of those your privilege robs or fails to feed. But consider this shepherd your adversary, because he is.

Or let Jesus find you. Let him tend your wounds. Let Jesus love you with the love of eternal God. Let him unmask you, showing you just how weak and vulnerable you really are. Let Jesus show you how much you need others, especially those you've been content to ignore or cast aside. Let him lead you to take up your place among them.

Then let Jesus put new clothes on you. Join the sisters and brothers he has rescued. Walk with them. Care for them. Listen to their story. Let Jesus reshape your story. Let him turn your self-reliance into humility and your boasting into thanksgiving. Then you will join that heavenly throng that no one can number, palm branch in hand. And you will shout, with joy and wonder, *'Salvation to our God, and to the Lamb.'*

And we will sing, 'Victory, O Victory! Now we see that victory! Oh how happy can we be! Christ has won the victory!' And you will march with the persecuted of every age who cry: Christ is King! Alleluia!"⁴

⁴ Source material drawn from www.gbod.org and Dr. Taylor Burton

Let us pray...

Gracious God, we come to you as your children, made in your image. We need your grace and mercy, yet we struggle to get past our own interests. Fill us with a spirit of love and truth. Free us from the tyranny of the urgent, show us how to find silence. Give us the courage to turn away from self-destructive attitudes and behaviors, embracing the new way of life you give. Show us how to truly follow you, no matter what it may cost, so that we may live and care for others in your name. Amen.

Ezekiel 34:11-16 (CEB)

The LORD God proclaims: I myself will search for my flock and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out the flock when some in the flock have been scattered, so will I seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered during the time of clouds and thick darkness. I will gather and lead them out from the countries and peoples, and I will bring them to their own fertile land. I will feed them on Israel's highlands, along the riverbeds, and in all the inhabited places. I will feed them in good pasture, and their sheepfold will be there, on Israel's lofty highlands. On Israel's highlands, they will lie down in a secure fold and feed on green pastures. I myself will feed my flock and make them lie down. This is what the LORD God says. I will seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will destroy, because I will tend my sheep with justice.

Matthew 25:31-40 (CEB)

Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.'

Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.'