

Isaiah 2:1-5  
Psalm 122  
Romans 13:11-14  
MATTHEW 24:36-44

## PRAY, LISTEN AND GIVE

Today, of all the days in the year, is probably the day the Church is most out of step with American popular culture.

Thank God.

Around us we have the annual frenzied “festival” of how-many-shopping-days-left-until-Christmas, a process which just may add extra pressure, anxiety and poverty to an already emotional time of the year. Americans have hundreds of billions of dollars in credit card debt, and economists alternate wringing their hands over signs that people either (a) are actually paying some of it off, or (b) *aren't* paying it off, as if the failure of more people to get in debt over their heads without actually going bankrupt will mean the end of the world.

On the other hand, we hear in today’s Gospel reading about the *actual* End of The World when, as the Nicene Creed says, “Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

And we hear, in Isaiah’s magnificent vision, how “in the days to come” perfect peace will come to the earth, even in its most strife-torn areas: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.”

I don’t see too many ads on TV promoting this vision of the return of Christ as judge and ruler, and the blessings of peace flooding all the world afterwards. But *that* is what we as Christians are asked to focus on *today*, not on whether or not Uncle Egbert will remember that you gave him a necktie for Christmas *last* year as well.

Oh yes, and in the words of today’s Epistle – and the Collect which echoes it – we are called “to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which God’s Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.”

What things we buy at Christmas are not, in fact, matters of life and death. Whether or not we “cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light” *is*, in fact, a matter of life and death, for us and others.

Let me offer a plan for this season of Advent, these four weeks before Christmas, which could plant us firmly in Christian faith and practice while helping us to deal with our worlds as they are. The plan, naturally, involves each of us praying for God’s guidance to help each of us mold a personal spiritual plan for our own unique circumstances.

The three key words for this plan are “pray, listen, and give.”

First, pray. Let us *give thanks* that Christ *will* come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” This is good news, in fact the ultimate good news for those who are faithful and loving – unless you think that the world we currently live in is already the best of all possible worlds, in which case someone needs to take you on a tour.

Our next prayer is this: once a day, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and ask to be filled with “the peace of God, which passes all understanding,” even a tiny bit of which will radically improve your day.

Prayers of thanksgiving, petition, and finally of intercession, praying for others. *Let’s pray for some really “long shots.”* I’m not talking about horses, but about noble causes that seem, to say the least, unlikely to come to pass. Causes some people would think it was “pointless” to pray for.

As pointless as, say, praying for peace, free elections and prosperity might have seemed 55 years ago in...South Korea, which was then being devastated by war, dictatorship and poverty. Such prayers were *not* pointless. Check out today’s reality.

As pointless as, say, praying for liberation from foreign occupation, for free elections and greater prosperity might have seemed 35 years ago in...Poland. Guess what.

Or as really pointless as praying for a peaceful transition of power to an elected, majority rule government might have seemed less than 25 years ago in...South Africa.

Do we see a pattern here? It takes *faith*, to dream, plan and build in the face of the kind of radically challenging circumstances faced by people in those countries and those times, but Christians with faith have been very instrumental in helping all of those “long shots” to come in.

There have, of course, been plenty of dreams on these shores as well. In 1963, someone stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial and declared his faith in a dream that “one day, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” “Nice dream, Dr. King,” some listeners might have said at the time, “but it’ll never happen.”

*It happens every week at St. Barnabas*, among other places. We certainly have the descendents of former slaves, and I know for sure we have *at least* one descendent of a slave-owner...me. Just by our showing up each week and gathering around the Lord’s table, we are living a small part of Martin Luther King’s dream.

A small part. But America, and the world, are still a long way from *God’s* dream for us. But dreams can come true thanks to inspired, hard-working people willing to be guided by God to *dream, plan and build*, and to make the sacrifices necessary to make dreams come true.

So, let’s “pray for the peace of Jerusalem”, in the words of today’s psalm. Now *there’s* a “long shot.” I’ll bet you can’t even get odds in Las Vegas on that happening. But we can be a part of praying a dream that many, indeed, are working on. Let’s pray for peace and justice in Iraq and Afghanistan, too. Lots of people are risking a lot to try

to make that happen. Let's pray for an end to polio, malaria, and H.I.V./A.I.D.S. Pick a dream and pray for it.

So the first key word is pray. The second key word is listen. This Advent, let's each of us talk with and listen to someone who is *different* from us in a way that seeks to build mutual understanding.

There is far too much hate in our country. In 2005, the FBI recorded 7,163 "bias incidents," which is 7,163 too many. Let us be part of building a nation in which hate crimes are *unthinkable*, and as a start toward that, let us build relationships that reduce stereotyping, bigotry and misunderstanding.

We could start by initiating a dialogue with someone we know who is *not* getting ready to celebrate Christmas. What's it like for a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu or someone of another non-Christian faith in a month which is commonly referred to as "the holidays" but which isn't about any of *their* major holy days? They also *may not know* fully what Christmas *as a holy day* means to *you* as a *Christian*. *There's* something for a coffee break dialogue.

You could start also by initiating a dialogue with someone who is an immigrant (if you were born in America) or with someone who was born here if you are an immigrant. What does "Thanksgiving" mean to you – as a day, or as a concept – in the context of living here? We need more dialogues between immigrants and descendents of immigrants – which are, let's remember, the only two categories of people who live in the United States. (Even the Cherokees, Lenapi and other Native American tribes originally came from somewhere else – and they walked.) Speaking as a descendent of immigrants myself, such talking and listening has helped me appreciate a lot of things I usually take for granted, and have added to what Thanksgiving and giving thanks mean to me.

Pray, talk and finally give. You knew that was coming, didn't you? Well, let's get back to "Uncle Egbert", who always gets a necktie for Christmas because nobody can think what else to get him. Judging from the lines at the "returns" desks at department stores the week after Christmas, there are an awful lot of "Uncle Egberts" out there.

I face a problem every year figuring out what to give my brother-in-law, Lee, of whom I am very fond, for his birthday and for Christmas. He already has a lot of things that he likes. He's a fisherman, but he doesn't need more gear as far as I know, and I wouldn't know what to buy him if he did need more, and I've run out of books to give him about fishing in various obscure natural areas.

But I found the answer in, of all places, Episcopal Relief and Development's "Gifts for Life" catalogue [I hold up a copy]. This year, I'm giving a contribution in Lee's honor to help a family in a Third World country start a fish farm so that they can have a dependable source of protein and a source of self-support. Purchasing "one share" in such a project is \$25. Beats buying another necktie or two. And you get a nifty card which explains the program and how it will be a little something to lift someone out of a lifetime of poverty and malnutrition.

Some "Uncle Egbert" may say to such a gift, "Bah, humbug" like Scrooge. His loss. Honestly, Uncle Egbert may have said the same thing about another necktie,

anyway. But some recipients may say, “Hmm. I didn’t know there *were* such gifts.” And just maybe, one might say, “This is the best present I got this year,” and that recipient might also decide to do something similar for someone else. Pay it forward.

So, if you have a fisherman or –woman on your list, there’s an idea. Or if you have a sports enthusiast on your list, especially someone who plays or watches a sport which involves a *net* – say, basketball, soccer, hockey, lacrosse, volleyball, badminton, tennis – why not give an anti-malarial *net* in that person’s honor, so that one more child in Africa can have a better chance to live to see *next* Christmas? Twelve bucks for five years protection for a mother and two kids. That’s it.

If you have someone on your list who’s involved in medicine or wants to be, or someone who needs to be reminded what a blessing it is to *have* nurses, doctors and hospitals to which they can go, contribute to one of the mobile health clinics Episcopal Relief and Development funds in areas where the nearest health facility may be 100 miles away.

The Episcopal Relief and Development catalogue will be on the table in the Welcoming Area. Please look at it and leave it there, though you can take the sheet with the website ([www.er-d.org/giftsforlife](http://www.er-d.org/giftsforlife)) and the phone number. It has over two dozen ideas for gifts in all price ranges.

Your giving might help someone else’s prayer come true – a prayer that her or his child might live long enough to go to school, might have a school to go to, might be able to support him- or herself in dignity with freedom, and *that* could reduce the hatred and violence in the world as other people respond to grace and generosity with more grace and generosity.

It’s not at all pointless to pray, listen and give so that we, and others, might “cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light.”

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