

SEEING WHAT WE NEED TO SEE
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Advent is a season for waiting and preparation. First of all it is important to remember that for most of the history of Christianity, Christmas was not the high point of the year. That was and still should be Holy Week and Easter with the season following until Pentecost. Christmas as we know it is truly a creation especially now of a secular world. We've lost, in our world, the understanding of what Advent was for as the church year evolved. The coming of Christ was not Christmas but the second coming and the end of the world.

We start year B in our cycle of readings today. Year B will focus on the readings of Mark and it is critical to understand something about Mark. The focus of the gospel of Mark is totally on the movement to the cross and the crucifixion.

Mark basically has no use for Christmas as we know it nor for that matter the resurrection. There is in the original gospel account of Mark no mention of the resurrection nor is there any mention of the birth of Jesus. He starts with John the Baptist and Jesus as an adult. His gospel closes with an empty tomb and no resurrection appearance.

The little apocalypse of which today's passage is a small part plays a significant role for Mark's theology. Apocalyptic writings are those writings surrounding the end times and the revelation of what is to come were common in the world of Jesus' time.

For Mark this was all about the in-breaking into our world of the kingdom of God. This in-breaking would release the early Christians from their time or persecution. The kingdom would rescue them from all the attacks and they would get their reward for being faithful. Rather than dread the end they embraced it and looked forward to it with eager anticipation.

This is why the key word in this passage is watch. Stay awake for you do not know when the end will come, but more important the call is to watch for it. This is the point of the passage about the fig tree. Stay awake. Keep your eyes open. Watch for the signs, watch for the Son of Man to return.

Which brings to a very contemporary situation that I feel I must address if we are to watch for opportunities while the boss is away as the gospel says. The big problem may be that we don't notice the things we should. In our overhyped world with 24/7 news channels declaring the end of the world, portraying continual acts of horrible violence etc becomes like the jets flying out of Oceana. When I first moved here, from Cape Cod where the only planes you ever heard

were the banner towing planes over the beach in the summer, I was amazed at how many planes I heard. Now like most of us I don't even hear them unless one is really low over an area where they normally do not fly. Like jet noise, I fear we have become so used to violence in our culture that we do not seem to be bothered by it anymore, react with even more violence, or even worse feel there is nothing that we can do. If that is true then the works of darkness in our world that is in our collect for the day, have won. It really was the word darkness in the collect that jumped out at me at the beginning of the week as I worked on this sermon while following the events in Ferguson. Many leaders in our church have addressed this and I feel that I too must take a moment to look at the works of darkness, not just this event but the entire issue behind it. For it is a matter for churches to be concerned with. It is a matter of evil that is rampant in our world, our country and yes in our city.

Presiding Bishop Katherine said this week, "Michael Brown's death was and is a tragedy, and has become a powerful witness to those divisions between human beings in this nation. His death also carries the potential to become a sacramental offering – if it continues to challenge us to address our divisions and the injustices in this nation that are far more than skin deep."

I am not going to get into the issue of who is right or wrong, whether the grand jury should have indicted the police officer or not, that is not really the question. Over the past year I have had my eyes opened as I watched and walked with Wendy at her ministry at Good Samaritan. The bad news is that issues at work in Ferguson Missouri are also at work here in Virginia Beach and Norfolk. The good news is that there is something that churches in particular can do to move past the deep mistrust and misunderstanding.

After several murders and even more shootings in the Lake Edwards and the Campus East area including a break in at Good Samaritan and the Methodist Church, the Western Bayside Churches got together with the chief of police and the precinct captain to ask what can they as a faith community do about the situation. Called to be peacemakers in the best gospel tradition they said, what can we do to make a difference. Now these churches for several years have been working to break down those barriers between the police, city government and the neighborhood. That is what the community days that we have helped out with are about. These days bring health, safety and human services out of their buildings and into the neighborhood where they can interact with the residents in a non-threatening environment. A place the Lake Edwards residents can learn that the police and city officials are not the enemy.

Do you all know about "the talk" that the African American community refers to especially in regards to their young men? The talk is not about sex, but about how to respond when you are pulled over by a policeman. Here is how to behave so you don't get shot. How many of you have felt you had to have that talk with your children? Now it is hard to blame you average police officer who now has to

wear a bullet proof vest to do any duty outside of the station because of the wide spread prevalence of high powered guns on the street and I'm not going to go there at all. This however sets the stage for potentially fatal situations.

Back to Lake Edwards, the churches are now hosting monthly meetings with the local police precinct officers including Captain Hebert. They have learned how to be a neighborhood because nobody ever taught them to pay attention to what is going on out their windows. They have changed a it's not my house, car, family whatever to hey I should call the police because there are people at the house across the street that don't belong. And the police are now responding to those calls and guess what. Crime in the last six months according to the precinct is down 50% especially property crimes. All this because people are sitting down together in a safe environment provided by the churches to address the issues. As the only white person in the room Wendy has had her eyes opened to just how deep the issues are. Likewise the neighbors have had their eyes opened to their responsibility in being a neighborhood. The police to have had their eyes opened to how they are viewed and that has made a difference in their approach.

This is not just community service but real gospel work of being peacemakers in a violent area. Think how many principles of the gospel that Jesus preached are contained in this work. So how can we help, well next spring when they have their community days and I ask if anyone is willing to go help Good Sam host 2500 people from the neighborhood, maybe some of you will come with me.

I have a classmate who is a priest in Sharon Pennsylvania and is also on city council. In his blog he posted these words of wisdom.

“First, know your community. Walk and drive around neighborhoods that you don't frequent. Stop in and meet local shop owners and those running area social service agencies. Build relationships with people in town, including people who you wouldn't meet in other places.

Second, find out about your local government. Go to a city council or school board meeting. Ask questions. Talk to the police chief or the fire chief about what struggles the community is facing and what struggles their department is facing. Then do what makes sense based on what you find out.

Third, pray. Pray, and ask your church to pray, for our public safety officers, for all the needs of our communities, and for racial reconciliation in the U.S.”

How do you some of this, well it is not that hard. Join me some day and do a ride along with the Seton Street Outreach van. See parts of our city you do not even know exist. Join Dana and Kevin some Saturday morning and go meet the homeless that they feed. This is not political this is gospel work. We have an opportunity to let the kingdom break through in the wake of this tragedy. We are told during Advent be pay attention be alert, well here is your chance.

ADDITIONAL OPPORUNITY: During announcements following the sermon our choir director alerted us to the fact that the same issues are occurring within walking distance of our parish at her elementary school. She is looking for people to step up and be lunch buddies with fourth grade students at her building. This involves going to her school at 11:45 on Tuesday's a developing a relationship with a single student and helping them deal with the issues of their young lives. This is another outstanding way you can help do some of the things mentioned in this sermon.