November 30, 2025
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
Matthew 24:36-44

At the beginning of Advent we are reminded of two very important themes in our Christian life together – we are to prepare for the birth of Jesus which we celebrate each year, and for whom we make room in our hearts. By this I mean an expanded interior landscape where a period of significant self-discovery and innate potential and goodness can thrive. In other words, we hope to grow new ways in Christ in whom we are born again and again.

And we also prepare for the promised return of Jesus at the last day, in hopefully some far off future, which will birth a new era of peace and justice on earth, after a vanquishing of all corrupt human systems of power. The reality is, our expanded sense of empowerment for which we pray in Advent is part of our call as Christians to help build God's kingdom now, to help repair the breach now, to turn over corrupt systems now…thus turning our fears into mindful acts towards justice.

We are people who cherish our traditions, and love to immerse ourselves in the spirit of Love and Peace that surrounds the baby Jesus in the manger. At the same time, we yearn for the fullest sense and reality of God's kingdom to come, on earth as it is already in heaven.

Our lesson from Isaiah and the Psalm appointed for today both emphasize hope, for hope is needed when what is happening around us does not match our image of God's kingdom on earth.

And the lesson from Romans and the gospel remind us to be as alert as we possibly can, so that we can witness the coming of the new age and be a part of it. It is for this that we must be ready, as the gospel reading emphasizes.

Last week across a substack article by Krista Tippett. I have followed Krista Tippett for a while. She used to have a radio talk show On Being on NPR at 7 am and I would listen to it on my way to church. It is now possible to hear the conversations she has with spiritual people on the On Being podcast. Tippett is a Peabody award winning broadcaster, a National Humanities Medalist, and a New York Times bestseller.

Writing about her life, and her vocation, after being a diplomat in divided Germany in the 80's, she says of her work as a talk show host on the topic of spirituality:

"That reality, and the questions it raised about what matters in a life and where true power is carried, eventually sent me to study theology — the part of the human enterprise that has most persistently carried the questions of what it means to be human and how we want to live and who we will be to each other. These are the questions that our great religious and spiritual traditions arose to address — and they are the universal human questions. They are the root questions that animate On Being now."

"…In imagery from the ancient Greeks and theology I love, we inhabit a Kairos time. Unlike the Kronos time of clocks and deadlines and

schedules and plans, this is an inbreaking that disrupts everything that came before and calls us to remake the world.”

“The ruptures of our world now are not unprecedented in the long history of humanity. Yet the stakes of the challenges before us — ecological, racial, economic, political — are in a new way existential. The question of what it means to be human has become inextricable from the question of who we will be to each other. How we live into that question, I believe, will spell the difference between whether we merely survive, or whether we hold the possibility of flourishing as whole human beings, with whole institutions, inhabiting whole societies.”

“My life of conversation has taught me that wisdom and wholeness emerge paradoxically, yet precisely, in moments like ours, when human beings have to hold seemingly opposing realities in a creative tension and interplay: power and frailty, birth and death, pain and hope, beauty and brokenness, mystery and conviction, calm and fierceness, mine and yours.” [unquote]

I think everyone wants to belong to a community and to be welcomed, heard, and with whom to practice deep listening, and basically to share their lives with one another. As an episcopal church community, I truly think we can offer a space for both the love and peace that relationship with the Christ child offers, as well as for the tough work of standing against the systems of the world that seem to work against God’s desired kingdom on earth.

I have been thinking about some things that we might be able to add to our St. John’s programs to enrich our parish life, and to be

welcoming to others. These are not unique; I am sure you could tell me of similar programs that were offered here in the past.

One idea is related to something I spoke about in my sermon a few weeks back. The community of Little Gidding during the Carolinian period of English History, which provided a retreat center of sorts and also offered food and education to the country children during this English war which lasted from 1625-1649. There was also a collective of poets and spiritual people who worshipped together, wrote religious pamphlets, and kept alive their cherished Anglican traditions. Nicholas Ferrar and George Herbert come to mind.

I imagine that St. John's could be like Little Gidding, and we could expand what we currently offer in terms of Bible Study, Book Study, Spirituality and the Arts workshops led by our very own artists, and contemplative worship.

One reason I am drawn to Evensong worship is that it often is comprised of Taizé music.

The community in Taizé, in south western France, was started by Brother Roger, who is no longer with us, but who was the founder of this monastic community of protestant and catholic brothers that has its roots in being a sanctuary for soldiers of any country in WW II. His grandmother housed refugees in WW I, and his mother in WW II. So he has a matriarchal line of providing a lifeline for people at risk. After the war, the community became a center for spirituality primarily for international youth, and simple and beautiful songs were written in Latin by the brothers. In this way the young people who spoke different languages could sing together. Over time, their appeal has grown to a intergenerational ecumenical community.

One of my bucket list items is to take a church group on pilgrimage there, but I am getting ahead of myself! For now, I am curious if anyone else is interested in starting a once a month Evensong Worship Service, perhaps on a Sunday afternoon at 5 pm or another evening.

I have been involved in this ministry for 20 years. It is usually comprised of church members and local friends who are singers and musicians. Music from the Taizé tradition is often offered, but there are many sources of contemplative music. Whereas Sunday morning worship utilizes Rite I or Rite II liturgies, an evensong liturgy usually uses the Evening Prayer services from the BCP. The New Zealand Prayer Book (the New Zealand form of the BCP) is often utilized, since it is characterized by language of the Maori people of New Zealand and their deep connection with nature. In general, there are less words, and more music, or at least 50-50, so that we can rest in the holiness of the prayerful music.

I had a dream recently. (The Bible takes dreams seriously, and have studied the life and work of Carl Jung, so I may occasionally talk about a relevant dream. In this dream, my hands were frozen in the form of clenched fists. I went to the school nurse, who put warm cloths on my hands, and they softened.

I also had been hearing the word “calm” in my heart – Calm, calm, calm…all day.

Back to Krista Tippitt, she referenced this idea of clenched fists and this lovely word calm in another substack article.

She was discussing an exercise that Vietnamese author and world renown spiritual leader Thich Naht Hahn had used in a retreat he had led which she attended.

Softening the clenched fist

She writes, “On the 1st morning of this retreat, Thich Naht Hahn invited each of us to clench a fist with one of our hands. Try this if you will: move to force that fist open with your other hand. The fist only clenches tighter, as if by its own will, a natural reaction to force. And I invite you to try then, a counterintuitive approach. Cradle the fist with your other hand, with the same naturalness, but a wholly other quality of feeling and response…the fist releases, it softens.”

“A sea of clenched fists is a metaphor for our world right now.”

Then she writes, “One of the most powerful ways that we can be present to our world's pain is with a countercultural tenderness.”

“So many of us are asking how we can be healing forces, what we are called to in this moment. And as instinctive and right as it is that we are creatively and imaginatively pondering how we can be actively be present to our world's pain and its promise, there is a quieter calling that each of us can pick up in the places we know and live: to be a calmer of fear. To soften the fists that so many of our bodies and hearts have clenched into. Like it or not, for an action plan feels stronger - this is slow, relational, essential groundwork that we must lay if we are to find our way to our belonging to each other and our shared callings, to create a transformed world we want all of our children to inhabit.”

So between the calm of the birth of the baby Jesus, and the fears that come about when we consider these apocalyptic times, (I truly believe *this too shall pass*); evenso between the calm and the fear, we can provide a safe harbour to those who are drawn to our Episcopal Traditions. I do not fear actual war…however we all are aware that we are in a time of culture wars. Bitterness, divisiveness and mistrust abound. It's hard to believe anything anyone says. So how can St. John's offer an alternative to all this noise during the next year(s)?

Evensong is just one idea. Maybe we can plan a series of brainstorming sessions in Epiphany and Lent 2026. Let's Discern the Soul of St. John's together, and see if we can be a sanctuary to a public who hungers for spirituality during trying times.

I end with a prayer for today from Fragments of you Ancient Name, by Joyce Rupp.

Alpha and Omega – the first and the last

Alpha and Omega, two simple Greek words

Found on many church altars and art,

Reminders of those who see and perceive

That You are the bookends of existence.

You are the hidden architect of all that is,

There before the world we know was born,

There where the unknown future will end.

The momentum of life and death are Yours,

For You view us as none of us can,

The journey each one takes, and its fulfillment.

Let it be so.

Footnotes

1. Krista Tippett. July 20th, 2024. On Being; Reflections from Plum Village on healing our world's pain.
2. Rupp, Joyce; Fragments of your Ancient Name; Sorin Books; Notre Dame, Indiana; 2011

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