

As I have shared with you before from this pulpit, one of the great privileges I have had in my ministry has been the opportunity to visit several Anglican dioceses in Africa. During my time as Bishop of Iowa, of course, I visited our companion Diocese of Swaziland a number of times. When I was the ecumenical officer for the Episcopal Church, I was able to travel to the Diocese of Cape Town, South Africa, and once accompanied the Presiding Bishop to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania for a meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion.

I had, of course, heard of the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa and of the vibrancy of these new Christians' faith, even in the face of war and persecution. Now that the Diocese of Iowa also has a companion link in South Sudan, we are even more aware of the terrible events in that new nation and share their sadness and deep concern – for our friend, Archbishop Samuel Peni and for so many others there.

Of course, one of the reasons for the vibrancy of the Christian faith in parts of Africa is that it is so **new** to so many. While European missionary work has been going on in Africa since the 19th century and, of course, northern Africa has an indigenous Christianity which stretches back to the earliest days of the church's life, nonetheless millions have been converted to Christ in the last few decades on that great continent.

So, when you experience the church in Africa, it's as though the Christians there are actually living *The Acts of the Apostles*, complete with massive conversions, reports of healings and exorcisms and, of course, the persecution which looks for all the world like what the early Christians went through at the hands of the Roman Empire! And one thing you can't help but be impressed with is the excitement and even the urgency with which they practice the Faith.

I'm always reminded of that when I read today's Gospel...where Jesus says, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet...blessed are those... whom the master finds alert when he comes. (And) know this: if the owner of a house had known at what hour a thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (Luke 12 passim)

We have here two ways of describing how Christians should remain on the alert for what we call "the Second Coming" of Christ or "Judgment Day." The first: how workers should behave when the boss is away – they should keep working, be good stewards of what has been entrusted to them, and be ready for the CEO's return. The second image: how a homeowner should remain vigilant all night long, lest the house be broken into – since burglars don't usually call for an appointment before they show up! You have to be alert! As, apparently Representative Elijah Cummings was a few weeks ago when his house was broken into!

Jesus' point here, of course, is that we only have so much time to get our work done here on earth. That argument was particularly compelling in the first century when Christians expected the Second Coming of Christ to happen very soon. From what we know of the early church, some Christians used this as an excuse not to work at all. I mean, why bother if Jesus is going to show up tomorrow?

St. Paul, in his letters to the Thessalonians, and Luke in sharing Jesus' metaphors in this Gospel, takes the opposite view. If he's coming back soon, get busy! New Christians, like those I met in Africa, often have that same sense of urgency because they (like the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses and some Pentecostal groups) still look for Jesus to return at any moment.

It's harder for Western Christians, like ourselves, who have long since made peace with the fact that it may be a long time until Christ's Return, harder for us to keep that sense of urgency. But let me tell you, my beloved, as one who lost his first wife to an unexpected heart attack at the age of 54; and as one now married to a woman who lost her eldest son during his first days in college in a tragic climbing accident, I can tell you for a fact: **We never DO know the day or the hour!** God might not **yet** be ready to judge the earth. But you and I might meet our Maker on the way home from church this morning! Or as victims of a mass murderer should we find ourselves in a Wal Mart...or a pub...or a school...or a church!

You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour! We still need to have the urgency and the sense of purpose those early Christians had, as our sisters and brothers in Africa still have! For it is our hope and our expectation that Jesus Christ **will** one day judge both the living and the dead – as we say every Sunday in the Nicene Creed - so let's be good stewards of whatever time we have left! Let's get busy! Busy doing what? Our Lessons from Scripture today tell us:

From Isaiah: Get busy and cease to do evil, get busy learning to do good; get busy seeking justice, get busy rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow." (Isaiah 1) Working for an end to violence and oppression in all its forms!

From the Psalmist: "I do not accuse you because of your sacrifices, your offerings are always before me...Whoever offers me the sacrifice of thanksgiving honors me, but those who **keep in my way** will I show the salvation of God." (Psalm 50) Get busy walking in the way of love. Because, as our Presiding Bishop often says, "If it's not about love, it's not about God!"

And, from the book of Hebrews: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. " (Hebrews 11:1) Get busy keeping the Faith...no matter how bleak things may look in our world today. Because faith is our only hope! And love is the only answer.

In other words, as we live our lives day by day, as we await the Coming of Christ or even the completion of our own journeys here on earth, we are to (as the Methodist founder John Wesley is reported to have said) “do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, for as long as you ever can.”

So, we are not only to offer God the sacrifice of thanksgiving here in the Eucharist each Sunday but to offer sacrifice by walking in God’s ways every, single day. And we are to keep the Faith, like our ancestors did, no matter what challenges we may face in this sinful and broken world.

Be dressed for action, dear friends, and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return...You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour!