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in new haven

SERMON -- ADVENT II

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Bantam, Connecticut
10:30 AM; Morning Prayer

The Rev. John E. Kitagawa
7 December 1980

Texts: Romans 15:1-13; Matthew 3:1-12.

In the Name of God. Amen.

"May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I begin with this prayer from Paul's Epistle to the Romans because it is his lasting prayer for us. Implicit in the prayer is the recognition of differences, even conflicts, among the faithful people of God. That reality of the early church has not changed. The Body of Christ, the Church, is badly broken by the scandal of denominationalism, and "historic differences". We are divided people too. We still think in terms of nationality, race, creed, color and so on. Demonic powers tear at the fabric of human society.

Also implicit in Paul's prayer is the notion that Christ's story is our story. Remember the phrase, "in accord with Christ Jesus". As Christians we can relate our stories to the Christ-history. We can discover our difficult calling in the world to be meaningful and glorious. For our calling is caught up in that of the Son of God. Through the recorded story of Christ in Scriptures, we can walk with Christ on his way to new life through death. Or, we can bring Christ into the present as a companion on our pilgrimage. Either way, our stories become meaningful as we discover our place in the divinely authored story.

We must not be afraid to be personal. For through our personal experiences we can create parables of God's way of working in the world. "Who" we are as Christians is never a question of the self in isolation. For our stories as Christians are formed by the story of Jesus of Nazareth. John the Baptist knew about personal history. His message is appropriate for us: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!" John the Baptist spoke to the nation of Israel, and to

each of its people. So too does he speak to us.

We are together this morning to worship. It is our common witness to our belief in the Word of God, and our faith in Christ. The fact that this is an Episcopal Church makes this preaching assignment a bit easier. My relationship with Chuck Perroncel and his family makes this place seem like a home away from home. I am a stranger to you, and you to me. Yet we have a common heritage and common commitments in Baptism. These factors serve to bring us together in an unity which defies the ways of the world.

Perhaps what I am saying is perfectly obvious to you. Let me remind you that there is much that can separate us. Yes, we are one in Christ, yet there are powers which can pull us apart. Look at me. Think about the date: 7 December 1980. Now think back 39 years to 7 December 1941. I am sure some of you can remember where you were and what you were doing when you learned of the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Empire. Many of us were not yet born. But that single event changed all of our lives. Some of you may have a direct connection to the ensuing war. For some of us, the reality and effects of the war are much more subtle.

Our stories are different viewed from this perspective. For you the history of World War II is clear. The United States was attacked. The United States defended itself, and ultimately defeated the Japanese Empire. I am sure you feel positively about this. I am ambivalent. I am an American, but the victory this nation celebrated meant that I never met my paternal grandmother. She was killed in a bombing raid on Fukui, less than a month before the peace. The war means my people have experienced nuclear holocaust. For Americans, the war meant deprivation, sacrifice, and the disruption of daily life. For my people, the war meant incarceration in concentration camps, without due process of law. Over 80% of those incarcerated were U.S. citizens. Incidentally, I am a direct result of the concentration camps. My parents met at Tule Lake Camp in northern California.

I was born in 1950. The war was long over. You may be surprised that 7 December 1941 affected my life significantly. I know the effects of the war linger on. I have been asked to leave homes because I represent the forces that killed a loved one. I can remember the day, 7 December 1968, when I found my picture plastered on the Leonia High School wall. The words below it read: "Wanted for the Bombing of Pearl Harbor." I can remember the pain. I can feel it now. Experiences such as these are not uncommon for me or for my people. The result is that I was once hesitant to go out in public on the 7th of December.

I do not want to recite a litany of similar experiences. Let me tell you instead of the deepest pain I have had to overcome. At the most difficult point in my life, I asked myself if I could be loved, and if I could love. So desparate, so pained, so disturbed was I that I felt unworthy of love, and unable to love. That is the mark of prejudice and racism which marginalize and minimize people as people. The exterior forces and experiences can be dealt with. But the internal ambivalence and self-doubt are demonic forces to cope with. And I tell you, it is an arduous struggle to keep from hating oneself.

It was at the lowest point in my life that I experienced the grace and love of God. In my senior year in college I was invited to join the "home Eucharist" group. The Chaplain, several professors, their spouses and a number of students gathered for discussion, prayer, and the Eucharist. I was confused, angry, hostile and alienated. Yet, they accepted me as I was, and as the person I was created to be. A healing process began. Through this small Christian community, the Holy Spirit acted in my life. It was my pentecost. I began to grow more open. In so doing, I began to prepare the way of the Lord, and to make straight his paths. I began to repent for my hardness of heart toward people and toward the Lord. In so doing I began to have hope.

Now, many years later, I stand before you. I find it a bit ironic that I am your preacher on this, the 39th Anniversary of the Bombing of Pearl Harbor. It is a sign of hope for me. I cannot think of any group I could tell my story to except the gathered community of Christ. I am full of joy and peace because my story is your story. The details are different, of course. But we are all in need of healing. We all are in need of repentance. We all yearn to love and to be loved. We are all in need of God's grace.

I am here to tell you, out of my story, that God does bestow his grace upon those who are open to it. In order to do so, we must open ourselves to a pilgrimage of discovering our own stories, and to placing our stories in the context of the Christ story.

John the Baptist prophesied that Christ would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. All who have entered into the water of Baptism have also entered Christ's death. When we emerged from the water of Baptism, we emerged into new life with Christ. In Baptism, we become a part of the Body of Christ. In Baptism, we receive spiritual grace. Believe it. For as I have learned, our lives depend upon it. But remember also the grace of the Spirit in

Baptism is given to us in Covenant. By that covenant we are to believe in God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. We have promised to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. We have sworn to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. We have committed ourselves to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We have said that we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Our stories are important and significant. Through our stories, we can become parables of the way God acts in the world today. The grace meant for us can transform our lives. But remember, we cannot hoard grace, for it is like bread. If we do not share it with others, it will eventually grow stale. We must then go in peace to love and serve the Lord. "The kingdom of Heaven is at hand", and so is God's judgment upon us.

Our stories are different from the perspective of the 7 December 1980 -- Pearl Harbor Day Anniversary. In that sense it is significant that we can worship together, and we are a sign of hope. But from the perspective of 7 December 1980 -- the Second Sunday of Advent -- our stories are the same. We are people redeemed by the Blood of Christ. We find it difficult to listen to that still small voice within us. We are sinful beings, vulnerable to the powers that tear at our oneness, and pull us apart. We have the Gospel stories to return to, and to bring forward into our time. As we pass through this Advent season, let us dedicate ourselves to preparing ourselves to receive the Christ into our lives anew, and let us make preparations for his coming again.

I want to end with a story which involves my father, who was also an Episcopal priest. Towards the end of the war he had occasion to preach in a church outside the concentration camp. After the service a young man approached him. That man told my father that he had sworn to kill the first Japanese person he saw. For he had been a concert violinist before the war. He had lost a hand in combat. But instead of killing my father, he asked to shake his hand. I suspect that young man had somehow gotten in touch with his own story as he listened to my father preach. And as he related his story to the story of Christ, he received the healing grace of God. Because he was open to receiving that grace, he was able to reach out to my father, formerly his bitter enemy. That is the power of God's transforming love.

Let me conclude with another of Paul's prayers:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

AMEN.