

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, December 8, 2019
Second Sunday in Advent

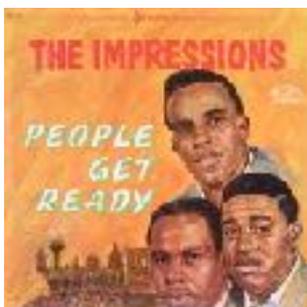
“People Get Ready”
Second of Four in “Are You Ready?”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10
Christian Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

Welcome to the *second* of four sermons dedicated to Advent
entitled “Are You Ready?”



Before we hear this morning’s message, let us listen to this song,
recorded in 1965 by Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions and remade
many times (notably by Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan, to name just
two).



The version we will listen to and watch this morning is by Rod Stewart, with Jeff Beck on guitar. I first heard the song when it was played live in the sanctuary during my ordination in 1999 by a close friend of mine who is a Blues guitarist.



As with our R.E.M. song last week, we can better interpret what the song speaks to us this Advent by learning more of its context. Curtis Mayfield wrote and sang this song soon after Martin Luther King's August 1963 'March on Washington' that culminated in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. If you recall from our sermon series earlier this year, our own dear Rev Dr Allen van der Meulen attended this march on 'our' behalf. The song "People Get Ready" also followed in the aftermath of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four little girls and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Those were tumultuous times.



And so are ours, for we worship during a time when our country is horribly polarized. We are entering the third time in our nation's history that it contemplates holding an impeachment trial of a president.



“People Get Ready”, like the mid-1960s and our own time, carries an oxymoronic alchemy of anxiety and hope. I chose to share this song with you because the Advent season is pregnant with the struggle for peace in the midst of anxiety. One commentator said of the song’s lyrics, “The ‘train that is coming’ in the song speaks to a chance of redemption - the long sought chance to rise above racism, to stand apart from despair, and any desire for retaliation - an end to the cycle of pain”.¹

¹ National Public Radio, “‘People Get Ready’: Song Inspired by March on Washington Carries Enduring Message”.
<https://www.npr.org/news/specials/march40th/people.html>, accessed December 8, 2019.

The song and video are powerful for us as a congregation as the train perhaps reminds us of the terrific struggle being waged by the Everett, Vose, and Grobe families as they and we cope with Michael's prognosis. Some weeks ago, the Make a Wish Foundation sponsored a family and friends trip on a train in Bellows Falls. Through this video, I pray our congregation accepts the invitation again to accompany Michael on our journey toward reunite with the God who created us.



[For you readers at home, watch the below video on YouTube.]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC_j_dzkaVE

People Get Ready

Rod Stewart

People, get ready

There's a train a-coming

You don't need no ticket

You just get on board

All you need is faith

To hear the diesels humming

Don't need no ticket

You just thank the Lord

People get ready
For the train to Jordan
Picking up passengers
From coast to coast

Faith is the key
Open the doors and board them
There's room for all
Amongst the loved the most

There ain't no room
For the hopeless sinner
Who would hurt all mankind
Just to save his own

Have pity on those
Whose chances are thinner
'Cause there's no hiding place
From the kingdom's throne

So people get ready
For the train a-comin'
You don't need no ticket
You just get on board

All you need is faith
To hear the diesels humming
Don't need no ticket
You just thank the Lord

I'm getting ready
I'm getting ready
This time I'm ready
This time I'm ready

I'm getting ready
Getting ready, oh yeah
I'm getting ready, yes I am

Source: [LyricFind](#)

Songwriters: Curtis Mayfield

People Get Ready lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner Chappell Music, Inc.

Curtis Mayfield said in a 1993 NPR interview that the song “People Get Ready” was “subconscious product of ‘the preaching of my grandmothers’ and most ministers when they reflect upon the Bible’”.² It is those teachings that we now delve into as we wade into the waters of our scriptures.



As I remove a foot of snow from the front of the church, I am conscious of the fact that the weight and cold of that snow seem to suffocate the garden in front of our church which Heidi, Margo, and others so beautifully cultivate. With every shovel-full of snow piled high, I remember the flowers upon which the cold and snow now suppress. Yet, I toiled in confidence, knowing that the garden will be resurrected.



² National Public Radio, ““People Get Ready’: Song Inspired by March on Washington Carries Enduring Message”. <https://www.npr.org/news/specials/march40th/people.html>, accessed December 8, 2019.

So it is with “the shoot that rises from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1). Light, peace, justice, comfort, and the realm of God will be inaugurated from the midst of darkness, war, unease, and the death that accompanies this realm.

Isaiah spoke words of hope following the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 AD.



Much of the northern kingdom was, by military edict, forcibly enslaved and deported into exile. Isaiah understood the cause of the kingdom’s woes stemmed from the corruption of its leaders, its kings. In chapter ten, Isaiah decried those “who make unjust laws, [...] issue oppressive decrees, [...] deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed” (Isaiah 10:1-2).



In our scripture, Isaiah envisioned how a new ruler will establish a world when the wolf and goat and the lion and the lamb will lie down together. Notice how the animal kingdom, the environment, and, one might even include the climate, are all in need of salvation and are thus a part of God’s salvific restoration. “At the same time, God will hold all people and nations accountable for the ways they treat the poorest and neediest among them” (Isaiah 11:4-5).



[We would do well to remember that the health of a country is not determined by Gross National Product, the growth of the stock market, nor any of its indices such the DOW, the NASDAQ, the SNP, or even by raw employment statistics. Instead, a nation’s wellbeing is best determined by health indices such as infant mortality and life expectancy, education indices such as literacy and college debt rates, and ‘quality of life’ indices. Quality of life indices reflect housing affordability, childcare, living wages, gun violence, and environmental cleanliness. These indices, better than the stock market, evaluate the health of a nation. The health of a nation is determined by how well the poorest 80 percent of the nation with 6.7 percent of investments

are doing *compared to* the richest 10 percent of the population that owns 84 percent of investments!^{3]}⁴



“Isaiah 11 points to the opportunity for renewal that arises when those who govern will judge the needy with righteousness and ‘will give decisions for the poor of the earth’. Today, we hope for a time when all wars will cease, and when Republicans and Democrats, the [richest] ‘1 percent’ and the [poorest] ‘99 percent’ may live and work together toward the needs of our nation and neighbors”.⁵ Advent envisions a future when, as Curtis Mayfield articulated, the nations’ rulers will “have pity on those whose chances are thinner”.

³ Louis Jacobson, “What Percentage of Americans Own Stocks?”, *Politifact California*, September 18, 2018. <https://www.politifact.com/california/statements/2018/sep/18/ro-khanna/what-percentage-americans-own-stocks/>

⁴ This section was not preached in worship due to time constraints.

⁵ Marvin A. McMickle, “Second Sunday in Advent”, in *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A* eds. Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald J. Allen, and Dale Andrews (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p. 13.



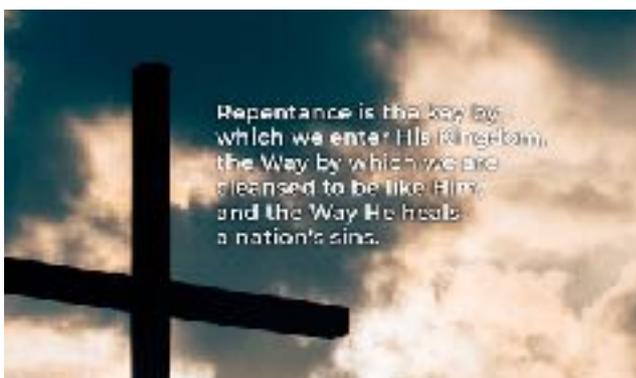
Our reading from the second testament speaks about a concept perhaps

not preached-on enough in liberal or progressive churches and pulpits: repentance. Mayfield reminds us in his song that “there ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner who would hurt all [human]kind just to save his [or her own]”. Perhaps progressive theologians like me avoid themes of sin and repentance because they seem judgemental. Well, repentance is not judgemental when it includes me *before* it includes others. I have tried in my preaching to admit to you when I fall short because John the Baptist and Jesus vomit their worst venom to hypocrites. I am in ministry not necessarily because I am a role model. Rather, I am in ministry, in part, to surround myself with Christians whom I wish to emulate. And there are saints in this church whose faithfulness inspires me!



This advent, be reminded by this progressive minister that repentance is

necessary for all of us! To ignore, neglect, or deny this truth is to deny the gospel ('good news') itself, for true repentance *is* good news! To those who demonstrate it and to those who hear it, repentance is so freeing! It actually feels so good to say, "I'm sorry" to one another and to God. There is no shame in repentance. There is only liberation. There is no humiliation in repentance. There is only restoration. There is nothing wrong with saying "I was wrong!" Only correction, wisdom, and fulfilment accompanies repentance. We all need to practice repentance and we all can benefit from repentance. It is like our song says, "You don't need no baggage, you just get on board".



Friends, this Advent may the hope erupting forth from Jesse's stump

give us the courage to heed the Baptist's call to be humble and repent. This Advent we are asking one another, "Are you ready?" The prophets tells us 'for what' - a new age of justice. The Baptist tells us 'how' - to repent. So, I conclude, "People Get Ready".

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, "Amen".