

**Agent Of Extraordinary Plans And Policies (B)**

**Date: 11/28/2021**

**Isaiah 9.2-7 Luke 21.25-28**

**Series: Imagining the Messiah Afresh**

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*Luke 21:25-28 (NRSV)*

*<sup>25</sup> “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup> People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

I want to begin this Advent in Perseverance..... Perseverance, Missouri, the fictional town I like to visit from time to time, when I want to offer the sermon in the form of a story. Sometimes a story can help us perceive our world and our faith a little differently.....a bit more imaginatively!

Perseverance exists in my mind, just a stone’s throw east of Kirksville, and somewhere north and west of Hannibal. One of the great assets of Perseverance is Winston College, a tiny, Presbyterian-related school founded in the 1880’s. Perseverance Presbyterian Church is the oldest and largest church in this town of 12,000 or so souls and is where I like to imagine myself as the pastor.

Our story begins at church with some surprising news. No one was quite sure what to expect, but all in the group were excited by the possibility! I was told that some of the male members of the young couples group had even made bets on different potential outcomes but I never saw any direct evidence of a betting pool, or I would have stopped it in a heartbeat...not because I disapprove of gambling; and not because I was upset that they didn’t give me the chance to get in on the action, but because Ray and Beulah would have been crushed by the thought that their own friends and fellow church members were betting on if and when they would get into a fight during their involvement in the annual Community Thanksgiving Feast at Perseverance Presbyterian.

The last time Ray and Beulah had been involved with the young couples group, and really with any activity at church besides attending worship, was fifteen months back –a year ago this past August when they had had a horrible fight in front of the entire group over whether or not the church baptismal font should be used as part of a carnival game at the Fall Harvest Festival, which takes place each August. Beulah thought our gigantic, ancient font would make the perfect pond for that game where magnetized plastic ducks are fished out of a body of water, and prizes are awarded based on the number marked on the duck. Ray, however, considered such use of the font to be theologically untenable and morally offensive and the two of them got into a fight for the ages right there in front of God and everybody—a fight that resulted in Ray storming out and accidentally knocking the font over as he left, causing a part of this sacred liturgical furniture to break off!

Well, the broken font was repaired in fairly short order--Ray and Beulah actually fixed it together. But the damage to Beulah’s and Ray’s marriage took a whole lot more time, and in many ways, is still a work in progress, and the damage to their relationship with the young couple’s group is still to be mended. Embarrassment takes a heavy toll on one’s ability to trust others and feel comfortable around them again. And I think Ray and Beulah still feel mighty embarrassed by their dreadful performance all those months ago!

The origins of the Community Thanksgiving Feast in Perseverance stretch back to a time before recorded memory. The best I have been able to piece together, is that it seems that this unique tradition started in the days when Winston College students couldn’t easily travel home for the holiday, and probably couldn’t have afforded

to go even if there had been a way but the college always closed for the holiday and the stranded students couldn't get any meal on Thanksgiving, let alone the traditional turkey, cranberries, mashed potatoes, and pie. Because most of the handful of the college's first professors worshipped at Perseverance Presbyterian with their families, some individual or group decided that the church members should provide a proper Thanksgiving feast to all the students who cared to show up on that day. And so, a first annual church-sponsored Thanksgiving meal quickly became an expected tradition. At some point, as often happens with traditions, concerned members of the church felt there were too many people in the larger community that didn't have family around, or who were going without a proper Thanksgiving meal for whatever reason, the student-focused meal became the Community Thanksgiving Feast for any and all in Perseverance who wanted to participate. Nearly 3,000 people have attended this meal each in the last ten years. It is a major undertaking! Bringing a dish to share is never expected, but always appreciated.

The young couples group took over stewardship of this community meal just a little over forty years ago, when most in the group were really young couples. As the years went by the group decided it wanted to stick together, but could never agree on a new name that better reflected the member's increasing maturity, and the fact that deaths and divorces, and new living arrangements that didn't always involve marriage had completely altered the make-up of the group.

The Thanksgiving Feast Coordination Team always begins their work around the first of October; one of the initial steps being putting out a call for individual volunteers to lead or captain different aspects of the meal –set-up/cleanup, turkey acquisition, decorations, noodles, potatoes, dish washing, pots & pans, beverages, pie, and on and on. Everyone in the group, and in the church, was shocked when Beulah signed up to be the Pie Captain the very first Sunday the volunteer sheets were up. Being the Pie Captain is not a small or easy task. This is high visibility leadership. A proper piece of pie, as everyone knows, can make or break the Thanksgiving meal experience. So, only the surest of apple pie makers dares to sign up as Pie Captain. You may have noticed that I said Apple Pie, for this the only kind of pie served at the Community Thanksgiving Feast.

It used to be that only pumpkin pie was on the menu, as the only proper Thanksgiving pie but then the pumpkin blight of 1953 came along. Unbeknownst to farmers and pie-bakers alike, some sort of mysterious bacteria infected that year's pumpkin crop in our neck of the woods. All over town pie-bakers busied themselves proudly putting forth their greatest baking effort of the year. For everyone in town gets to see, and potentially taste, the results of a pie brought to the Community Thanksgiving Feast.

Over the years, some pies have been so memorable, such objects of beauty, such delights to the taste buds, that responses to the pie-bakers art have included a coveted invitation to submit a recipe to the Midwest Pie Annual, and requests for baking lessons, and even a marriage proposal! But Thanksgiving of 1953 caught everyone off guard. The pie-bakers were using their skills and experience to create culinary masterpieces, when in fact they were making pumpkin-flavored dirty bombs, which proceeded to explode in the digestive system of nearly every soul in Perseverance. The mystery bacteria in that year's crop of pumpkins made the entire town sick for a week.

Nobody could really leave home for days. Classes at the college had to be canceled. Most of the stores on the square were closed. The courthouse was shut down. Doc Harter was so sick, that he had to call in coverage from the hospital up in Kirksville. The only two places open in town were the drug store and the water department. The drug store managed to stay open for the dispensing of kaopektate and other essential items, because the pharmacist in Memphis closed his own store at noon for an entire week and drove down to Perseverance. The water department was essential, because all the toilet flushing across town created a dangerously low water-pressure situation. In fact, the Holly Barn on the edge of town was lost to a massive fire the Sunday night after Thanksgiving that horrible year of '53 because the volunteer fire department could only manage a handful of fire fighters healthy enough to hold a hose, and then couldn't get enough water out of the nearby hydrant.

In the wake of that great crisis, the church leaders decreed that pumpkin pie would never again be served at the Thanksgiving feast and that apple pie –pure, wholesome, apple pie would be everyone’s dessert of choice!

Nobody was concerned with Beulah’s pie-baking credentials. She’s won numerous ribbons at the county fair over the years for her baked goods, including pies. Receiving one of Beulah’s pies for a birthday or special anniversary is among the greatest gifts to be received in Perseverance. One of the joys of being Beulah’s pastor, has been the many times I’ve been on the receiving end of her pie giving! As I mentioned earlier, however, Beulah and Ray had kept such a low profile for so long, that most of us thought they’d never intentionally involve themselves in a young couple’s activity again. This uncertainty, and the possibility of another fight between the two of them had everyone talking and the bets flowing!

Because a good, fresh pie can’t sit around too long before being consumed, the pie making gets under way on Tuesday before the meal on Thursday. And making nearly 400 pies consistent in quality, and every one delicious to the last crumb, takes a lot of work. Beulah began Tuesday by setting the ground rules for her team of ten. Her apple pie recipe came from her mother, who got it from her mother’s mother, who received it from her mother’s mother, in an unbroken chain stretching back over time. It is a recipe that Beulah knows like she knows the Lord’s Prayer –memorized completely – backwards and forwards; a pinch of this, a handful of that, only certain types of apples allowed. Thankfully the recipe is offered with a greater sense of joy than most of us muster when we recite the Lord’s Prayer in that rote monotone of pure drudgery...surely how Jesus intended us to pray! In Beulah’s apple pie only pure butter can be used, and it must be cut in to the dry ingredients using only a fork – no power equipment allowed! And all the apples have to be peeled by hand with a sharp paring knife. Ray once tried to speed up the peeling process by using his electric drill to spin the apple into a sharp blade. It actually worked pretty well, but it was not pure enough for Beulah, and the drill never reappeared at apple pie making time! Needless to say, Beulah’s team worked incredibly hard, and nearly around the clock to have all the pies ready to go by noon on Thursday when the Thanksgiving Feast began.

As Beulah and Ray headed home from the Feast late this past Thursday afternoon, they spoke of their shared exhaustion, and of how good it felt to finally be reconnected with the young couple’s group again, and of the joy they had experienced together through serving others as part of the church. They didn’t realize how big a void their self-enforced absence from church activities had created in their lives. The easing of their public embarrassment seemed to allow Ray and Beulah some long-desired and desperately needed measure of grace – grace for each other and for life in general. They also talked about the fact that this is one of those years where the start of Advent and Thanksgiving weekend coincide and that on Saturday, after a much needed day of rest, they would bring the boxes of decorations down from the attic, and begin to prepare the house for Christmas.

Ray told Beulah that her Advent Calendar had arrived in the mail while she was at church baking pies. Opening the little doors on the angel-adorned, glitter-covered calendar each day during the season had started for Beulah in childhood; and was something that still brought a leap of joy to her heart. Somehow the pictures and scripture verses behind those little doors made the gift of a messiah seem more real to her. From peeking ahead in her daily Advent devotion booklet, Beulah knew that the messiah, as a “Wonderful Counselor”, as the one who brings God’s extraordinary plans and policies to earth, would be the initial focus of her Advent spirituality.

As she and Ray unpacked the car when they got back out home –returning all the pie-making equipment to the kitchen, Beulah quietly offered her own prayer of Thanksgiving, asking God to give her patience to wait and watch for a messiah who is wise enough and wonderful enough to get God’s children, God’s embarrassed children like her, unstuck from the fears that keep them and their church paralyzed. And to her prayer, I would also add our need to be grateful for a Messiah who forgives those who bet on the odds of their fellow church members getting into another public fight! Pray with me.....Amen!!!