

## FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2022

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24: 36-44

On the Mount of Olives, Jesus sits and waits for his followers to seek him out. Jesus is beginning to speak like the prophets had spoken to the Hebrew People about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. In a huge garden surrounded by olive trees which had been around for a thousand years, Jesus connected with the Creator and Great Spirit who had swept over the waters of the Earth. These olive trees had listened to the words of the prophet Isaiah some five hundred years in the past. Speaking the words of the Source of All Life and Love, Isaiah proclaimed the profound sorrow which Creator/Great Spirit felt for all those who had ears but could not hear the voice of One who loved Human Beings dearly...who had eyes but could not see the wonders of Creation...who had minds which could not focus on the generosity and lovingkindness of Creator and Great Spirit...who had hearts which could not give thanks for the gifts of Mother Earth nor show compassion to the most vulnerable. Since his baptism in the wilderness along the Jordan River, Jesus too had demonstrated generosity and compassion in his teachings and in his acts of healing wherever he journeyed. Jesus too had come to experience a profound sorrow for those who did not let the seeds of good news take root and flourish but instead plotted to do him harm. In this gospel reading assigned for this First Sunday of Advent, his followers seek Jesus without the crowds to gain some understanding about what is about to happen to the political centre of their country and the sacred site where thousands of pilgrims came to pray each year from many places in the world.

### **Read Matthew 24:36-44. What catches my attention in this gospel passage?**

Jesus teaches about how life will continue in this creation as it has for millions of years until the day and hour at which this creation will come to an end and a new creation will come into being. Jesus himself is clear that even he does not know when the end will happen. Jesus states that even the Angels do not know when the last days will take place. Jesus says, **"...Only the Father knows!" Matthew 24:36.**

It is interesting that Jesus does not use the figure of a Mighty Ruler who will rise up out of the Mediterranean Sea to the west and come towards Jerusalem among the clouds surrounded with a heavenly host to stand before the crowds and sort out the sheep from the goats...the righteous from the unrighteous...those who do good acting with compassion and justice from those who cause grievous harm and do evil. The figure whom Jesus uses is that of a Loving Parent, steadfast in love and willing to sacrifice for their descendants to flourish. In Matthew's gospel, the Source of All Life and Love provides all that Human Beings need in abundance.

Jesus tells his followers to be vigilant and ready for the end to happen. Like the two criminals crucified with him, one will enter into Paradise and the other's life will come to an end in doing whatever he or she is doing at the time.

### **What do the followers of Jesus do while we wait for a new creation to be ushered into being?**

By example, Jesus shows us how to live life to the fullest and be the person whom Creator/Great Spirit equips and supports us to be. In every generation, natural disasters happen. Floods and fires and earthquakes and tsunamis cause damage. Diseases limit our physical capabilities and often lead to our death. Warfare has always been waged pitting people against each other and resulting all manner of atrocities. Escalating violence continues to wreak havoc among members of some households and nations. Greed propels people to exploit the gifts of Mother Earth and take for our own use what other Human Beings need for food, shelter, clothing, and trade. Certainly, we live in a generation when human consumption is contributing to the occurrence of more extreme climate events. Certainly, human consumption

has resulted in the extinction of living creatures and the growing numbers of threatened animals, birds, fish, plants, and trees. Waters have been polluted and lands have been contaminated so that restoration will take many generations of concerted effort to accomplish. Like the prophets of the Hebrew People, Jesus speaks the words of Creator/Great Spirit to the people of his time at a particular place in creation. Jesus points out that Human Beings in every generation are in the similar circumstances. Creator/Great Spirit continues to be present in creation and bringing new life into being. While we wait, we are being given opportunities to observe where and when Creator/Great Spirit is still present and at work. Once we identify where and when new life is being created and brought into being, you and I can celebrate. For Jesus, Creator/Great Spirit is generous and provides for all that we need to live and flourish. While we wait for our time to come to an end in this creation, we can rest in Creator/Great Spirit's abundance and steadfast lovingkindness. We can rejoice in the healing which is happening within ourselves and participate in the healing happening in our extended families. We can celebrate the new life coming into being through the revelation of truth and the experiences of reconciliation. We can join with others and work together in caring for Mother Earth and for the most vulnerable. Like generations in the past, we too can say that we live in very exciting times on this part of the planet.

### **Reread Luke 24:36-44. What is God saying to us?**

In flying north from Thunder Bay to Pikangikum, it was amazing to look down and see the vast amount of water in lakes and rivers flowing around clumps of forest. I thought about the explanation provided by Bishop Lydia Mamakwa about going out onto the waters on the traditional territories of Kingfisher Lake First Nation as a child with her parents to collect water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning. I remembered how Elders from various First Nations had spoken about how their respective Peoples moved from place to place on their traditional territories to harvest all that Creator/Great Spirit provided in abundance. In the spring, the Peoples of the Forest harvested sap from the Maple Nation and with their own technologies made maple syrup. In the spring the Peoples of the Longhouse, planted corn, squash, and beans in meadows. In the summer, Indigenous Peoples gathered at sacred sites to catch up on the news, engage in ceremonies, meet new members of extended families, and even find partners with whom to share life and bring children into this world. From spring through to fall, plants were harvested for food and medicines as well as to make different kinds of baskets. In the late summer, Nishnaabeg Peoples harvested wild rice to sustain them throughout the year. In the fall, hunters went out to particular places where moose and deer and caribou and geese could be found to sustain communities over the winter. Places to fish and hunt smaller animals were available throughout the year in various places on the Original People's traditional territories. Prior to first contact, the traditional territories for each Indigenous People covered vast amounts of land and waters.

When each of the many First Nations were restricted to their tiny reserves and their citizens needed permission from their Indian agent to leave their respective reserves, the need for water treatment plants, extensive water distribution networks, and effective wastewater management became evident over time, particularly in communities with larger populations. In talking with the Grand Chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Alvin Fiddler and his Policy Advisor and Director of Infrastructure, members of Pimatisiwin Nipi learned that a number of water treatment plants were built in larger First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario in the early and mid 1990's. At that time, the federal government selected construction contractors who went into Indigenous communities to build water treatment plants as well as to install a water distribution network and wastewater system connecting to some of the homes of these communities, the health centre, the welfare offices, the band office, the school, and housing built for teachers. In Kingfisher Lake First Nation, for example, only half of the citizens are connected to the water treatment plant and wastewater system so the other half of the communities receives safe, clean water delivered by water trucks and has wastewater trucks haul effluent away to the lagoon. In developing a relationship with Bishop Mamakwa in the last couple of years, she has pointed out that smaller communities also want safe, clean, and running water available in their homes. However, the construction of a water treatment plant for any sized community is very expensive.

When our delegation from the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund and Pimatisiwin Nipi (Living Waters established by the former National Indigenous Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada from non-Indigenous Parishes initially from southern Ontario) arrived in Pikangikum, we went to the Band Office to meet with the Chief and Council first as is the protocol to show respect towards this Original People. Chief Dean Owen could not be present since he and his wife had tested positive for Covid. Chief Dean Owen also was caring for his wife Ernestine as she was undergoing cancer treatments, most likely in Sioux Lookout or Thunder Bay. It had been the former Chief Gord Peters who had suggested that we could help Pikangikum in dealing the suicides of youth and young adults by providing homes with safe, clean water. It was Chief Dean Owen and Council who identified the most vulnerable in this community whose homes would be retrofitted. In this initial meeting, the Deputy Chief and Council expressed frustration that the Water Treatment Plant constructed in 1992 needed to be upgraded to serve a much larger population and that the sewage lagoon occasionally overflowed contaminating the waters in Pikangikum Lake upstream of the Water Treatment Plant. Parts for making repairs in this Water Treatment Plant are no longer available in North America and must be sourced from Third World countries so sometimes there is not enough safe, clean water available from their water treatment plant.

At the beginning of Phase One, Chief Dean Owen had identified that there were 484 homes in Pikangikum, most of which needed repairs and major renovations. As Phase Three began in May 2022, Chief Dean Owen arranged with young parents to build "shell" homes. Walls and roofs were constructed on foundations with water tanks and wastewater tanks as well as electricity installed. These "shell" homes were significantly larger than the previously constructed two-bedroom homes with outhouses constructed decades ago. The young parents agreed to obtain the building supplies to complete the interiors of these homes, often adding an additional one or two bedrooms to this floorplan. There are now over 500 homes in Pikangikum. About 8 to 10 people lived in each of these homes.

The Chief and Council had also been creative in repurposing the building designated as a place to quarantine citizens on the main waterline from the Water Treatment Plant and on the only wastewater line going to the sewage lagoon. Instead of being empty, these units in this building became home to individuals who struggled to live in small, overcrowded homes for one reason or another.

During the pandemic, we also learned that the Deputy Chief Jonah Strang had been very successful in keeping the numbers of Covid cases very low in order to protect the Elders and the most vulnerable in Pikangikum.

Afterwards, in meeting the Water Treatment Operator Allan Peters, our delegation learned that the Water Treatment Plant could only operate effectively at about a third of its capacity. Allan Peters pointed out that three of the five standing water points in Pikangikum were under a boil water advisory since leaks in the water distribution network had occurred. Special equipment was not available in Pikangikum to find where the leaks were located so that repairs could be done.

Over three days in Pikangikum, our delegation visited many of the homes which had benefited from the construction of an insulated addition to their home and installation of a water tank and a wastewater tank. A larger water heater and a larger water pump were added to each home. Plumbing upgrades were also completed. Pikangikum First Nation provided two water trucks and two wastewater trucks along with a communication system to request the use of these trucks. The Project Manager Raymond Suggashie was respected by the people who opened their homes to us and introduced us in Oji-Cree. Our hosts expressed their gratitude for the presence of safe, clean, and running water in their homes. We also learned about the difficulties in getting skilled electricians and plumbers to make repairs when needed. An Elder pointed out the benefits of getting gravel for where the water trucks and wastewater trucks needed to drive to where the water tank and wastewater tank were located. During wet weather, these trucks created deep ruts and could get stuck at these homes. In one home, our delegation was introduced to the home support team caring for the Elders who lived there. Some of our hosts felt safe and comfortable to identify the names of the youth and young adults who

had committed suicide or died due to health issues and were buried not far from their front door. Every household whom we visited also identified the names of other family members who lived with them. Our PWRDF delegate from Bearskin Lake, the Reverend Ophelia Kamenawatamin also spoke Oji-Cree and very quietly made connections with our hosts, honouring them and demonstrating an amazing pastoral presence. Everywhere that we went, someone came forward and identified themselves as extended family members.

In walking in a small part of this community at the end of each day, it was easier to see that outside the front doors of most of the homes, well-tended gravesites honoured family members who had died. The need for safe, clean, and running water is only one of a complex set of realities which contributed to the pain experienced by the citizens of Pikangikum.

At the end of our visit in Pikangikum, we returned to meet with the Deputy Chief and Council in demonstrating our respect of their sovereignty as a nation. A member of the Band Council again communicated their frustration that Pimatisiwin Nipi had raised funds to retrofit 10 homes in Phase One, another 10 homes in Phase Two, and was in the process of having 16 more homes retrofitted so that safe, clean, and running water was available in these homes. We acknowledged that Pimatisiwin Nipi was providing “bandaid support” but providing support for some vulnerable members of their community. Our delegation encouraged the Deputy Chief and Council in their efforts to campaign for a new water treatment plant as well as to upgrade their water distribution network and their wastewater system. Funding is still available raised through PWRDF prior to 2018 for a fifth phase with the current Project Manager prepared to retrofit more homes.

On our last night in Pikangikum, our delegation was invited to supper with a unique woman who had arrived in Pikangikum to operate a Sunday school program for the Full Gospel Church and had stayed for twenty-five years. This woman provided suicide prevention counselling at Eenchokay Birchstick School and supported the teachers during the school year to operate a youth group on Friday evenings. When teenage girls stayed for an overnight youth event in her home, two activities were favourites. The first was making homemade pizza together. The second was having a shower and washing their hair.

Since this trip to Pikangikum, Bishop Lydia Mamakwa and the Reverend David Franks made presentation to the Chiefs of Shibogama Tribal Council about the work of Pimatisiwin Nipi through the Mishamikoweesh Water Partnership. The Chiefs of the five First Nations around Kingfisher Lake First Nation accepted our invitation to begin work together in the coming years. At this time, the Chiefs of Shibogama Tribal Council are requesting an additional water truck to bring safe, clean water to the homes of half the citizens of Kingfisher Lake at a cost of about \$150,000.

### **Reread Matthew 24:36-44. What is God calling us to be and do?**

We live in very challenging times yet we know that Creator, the Peacemaker, the Eternal Word, and Great Spirit continue to be present in this creation and bring opportunities for healing and new life into the lives of Human Beings.

Pray for the new Chief Shirley Keeper, the Deputy Chief Jonah Strang, and the current Council for Pikangikum First Nation as this leadership team moves forward with Phase 5.

Pray for Bishop Lydia Mamakwa and the Chiefs of Shibogama Tribal Council as they move forward as part of the Mishamikoweesh Water Partnership.

If Creator, the Peacemaker, the Eternal Word, and Great Spirit move you to make a donation in the work of ensuring that safe, clean, and running water is available to more Indigenous communities in northwestern Ontario, designate this gift as the Mishamikoweesh Water Partnership and arrange for your parish to send these donations to the Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund.