

“Watching and Waiting”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 3, 2017

First Sunday of Advent

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 64:1-8

Mark 13:28-37

Most of the trees in Palestine are evergreens, but the fig tree is an exception. In the fall, it loses its leaves; and when its branches leaf out in the spring, summer cannot be far off. Thus, like the beginning of Advent, the greening fig tree is a sure sign of things to come.

Advent is a time of waiting: not just for the birth of Jesus, but for the transformation of our lives and the world. Advent, as a season, reflects the unfinished nature of creation – for God created an unfinished universe: one that requires our participation in its ongoing history. Jesus was born, fed the hungry, healed the sick, shared a vision of peace, died and rose again. And yet, his ministry is unfinished, and the world that he came to save still holds within it the ambiguities of salvation and sickness, beauty and brokenness. Jesus has already come, yet we are still waiting.¹

The season of Advent is a time of waiting – it is about watching expectantly. But it often seems, in church, like we are waiting only for Jesus in the manger – that we are busy cautioning ourselves against jumping too quickly to Christmas. Some of us even learned that when we set up our nativity scenes, the baby Jesus figurine should be put away; hidden until Christmas comes and it is time for him to be placed in the manger.

Advent is a season of expectant waiting and watching; but not just for a baby to appear in the manger. It is also about expecting Christ to be here, with us, in our lives right now. We are called to be alert for Jesus’ coming, but also to be aware of the ways that Christ appears in the present: breaking through time and space in our lives and in the lives of others. Are we ready and willing to be his hands and feet here and now?

In the middle of this Gospel reading, Jesus tells a very short parable about a man who goes on a trip and leaves his servants in charge. Each servant in the house is given a job to do, but they are not told when he will return. He tells his doorkeeper to be alert and that the staff must keep doing their jobs.

As we watch and wait for Christ to come, we have jobs to do. In Mark 6, Jesus gave his disciples authority to preach words of repentance, to cast out demons and to heal the sick. The church today is also called to offer words of forgiveness, and to speak out against that which is unfair or unjust, and to reach out to those who are sick or lonely or forgotten. This week’s text offers us a twofold message: stay busy at what Jesus has

¹ Bruce Epperly from “The Adventurous Lectionary”

called you to do as you wait for his coming; and be alert to the ways Jesus appears even now in your own life.²

Perhaps we have drawn too sharp a line between preparing for Christ's coming in Advent and celebrating it at Christmas. We might lament that there is not enough time to get everything we would like to get done in these weeks leading up to Christmas; but is there ever really enough time? Of course not; but maybe that is the point. God's coming disrupts and disorients us and our seemingly well-designed plans. "God arrives," writes Karoline Lewis, "regardless of our readiness. God shows up, despite our determination toward manifesting our own destiny. God will come, no matter what kind of stipulations or conditions or provisions we make to persuade God of our timeliness."³

Perhaps more than any of the other gospels, Mark offers an *apocalyptic* view of Jesus and the Christian life. Not apocalyptic in the "end of the world is coming" sense, but rather in that it pulls back the curtains to uncover false hopes and realities to reveal God's commitment to enter into our lives and our world the way they really are. Not when we are fully prepared, not when we have had ample time to get everything in order, but while we are both at work and expectantly watching and waiting. God comes into our midst where we are.

This parable about watching and waiting appears to refer to the events which will follow only a few days later in Mark's gospel: for Jesus will predict his arrest at the Lord's supper in the evening; he is handed over by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane by midnight; he is denied by Peter at cockcrow; and he is transferred to the Roman authorities in the morning.⁴ These are not far-in-the-future events, but what is soon to come. So, the admonishment to stay awake and to be alert is not just for the *when* of Jesus' coming, but also for the *how* and the *why*: God who is made flesh, comes to give himself wholly and completely to us and for us.

During this season when we are checking our lists and gathering our gifts, Advent might be the appropriate time to look around at those that are around us – in our families, in our schools and workplaces and neighborhoods, in these pews – and see one another as God's gifts. Though they may be different from us, though they may be imperfect in ways that are different from our own imperfections, this is the time to remember that all of God's beloved children are meant to be loved and treasured in the same way that God loves and treasures us.

Yes, we all have room for improvement: we could use our time more wisely; we could be more graceful and forgiving toward those who tend to grate at us; we can be less envious of those whose lives and worlds seem more peaceful and prosperous – all of us

² Dennis Sanders from *Lectionary Homiletics*

³ Karoline Lewis, "Advent Time"

⁴ Andrew Prior, "Seeking to Bleat Like a Sheep"

have room for improvement; and yet we are also enough: God accepts us as we are, loves us as we are, and comes to us as we are.

And so we remain awake and alert, waiting and watching expectantly for Jesus to come not just as a baby in a manger, but as the one who redeems and transforms our lives. We wait and watch for this coming because we live in a world that seems to lurch from crisis to crisis, with one disaster piled upon the last, where the threat of violence at home and abroad seems unceasing. Jesus speaks through this passage to a church and its people who desire for justice; for a renewed sense of identity in an uncertain time; for a refashioned future in a fragile and unfinished world.

But Jesus cautions us about claiming to know too much about the end times. We are not to be claim premature transformation or be so heavenly minded that we are no longer doing any earthly good.⁵ Jesus counsels us instead to be alert and awake. There may be some dramatic moment in our lives or communities, and we might be called to take some leap of faith into what appears to be an uncertain future. But God is also faithfully moving in this moment, offering clues and hints of transformation. We can – at the same time – both prepare for and welcome the coming; living Advent’s expectation, knowing that the baby is going to be in the manger soon.

And so, we can continue to do our jobs while we watch and wait: sharing words and acts of hope, working for justice, caring for those around us. We don’t have to put our faith in some heavenly rescue mission or turn our backs completely on society’s materialization of Christmas – because we know that these are not the things to which Jesus calls us to be alert. The birth is coming and the signs are already beginning to arrive. Like leaves sprouting from the fig tree, God is in our midst; we have what we need to be faithful

. Today, we are invited to come to Christ’s table of hope and remembrance; to taste and see that the Lord is good, because God has invited us to be participants in the transformation of creation. As the bread which is broken becomes, for us, the body of Christ, so we are gathered as the church and sent out to be the body of Christ for the world.

And so, beloved children of God, let us wait and watch expectantly for the coming of Christ: for the birth of a child, and for the ongoing call we are given to be transformed ever more into the hands and feet of Jesus for the world. AMEN.

⁵ Bruce Epperly from “The Adventurous Lectionary”