

### **“Heads Up” – Mk 13:24-37**

Well, Black Friday has happened in the land of our neighbours to the south, so I guess we’re officially into the Christmas spirit! Black Friday is so named because it is the day after American Thanksgiving and the day that retail stores hope the shopping rush will move them out of the red in the accounting year and into the black. It seems at first glance the tanking economy hasn’t had too much of a negative impact, but then again it was at a Wal-Mart store that a tragedy occurred when a store employee got trampled to death at 5:00am as he unlocked the doors to let the happy shoppers in, so perhaps shopping pressures are moving to the lower-end merchants. Mercy! What a sad way to start off what passes in our society now as the Christmas Season.

For us in the church the season of Christmas is technically the time after Dec. 24<sup>th</sup>. We know the season leading up to Christmas Day as Advent, a time of reflection, contemplation, and preparation in anticipation of that glorious moment. It is a time to consider once again the magnificent implications of the birth of Jesus, and to get ready to celebrate that world-changing event.

It’s important that we take this time to prepare, instead of immediately moving to look only at the ‘sweetness and light’ part of the Christmas story, focusing solely on the clean and gentle side of the poignant tale of a young couple propelled into a birth far from home; a wondrous and soft story of a newborn babe laid in a manger, complete with gentle angels, adoring shepherds, and magical visitors.

Of course, those are all wonderful elements upon which to focus. But we cannot, we must not, forget the realities behind this story, because just as the birth story itself grounds our faith in the realities of life, the birth and life of Jesus must be completely real as well. And the reality of birth, especially in those days, is that it was a fearful, risky, painful and tiring event, full of blood, sweat and tears. We must not lose sight of the less-than-pretty side of Jesus’ birth story, otherwise we can too easily lose sight of Jesus’ care and compassion for and acceptance of the people who lived their lives in the less-than-pretty parts of this world. If we lose sight that the first Advent of this Jesus – the Christ, the Messiah – was fully real, rooted not just in the pretty side of life but in all aspects of life, then we can too easily lose sight of Christ’s role in the second Advent.

That second Advent, that second coming, is the scene described in our reading from Mark’s gospel, a scene set in vivid cosmic images pointing out that Christ’s ultimate return will be no small event. This second time will not be an isolated birth in a remote town – then his arrival will be literally earth-shaking, disrupting the cycle of days and seasons, even Christmas! This ultimate event will complete the story echoed so clearly in our Creed: Jesus came, he ministered, he died, he rose again, he ascended into heaven and sits at God’s right hand – and from there he will return to judge the living and the dead. Without this concluding event life is without ultimate purpose, without clear meaning. With it, and because of it, life is given purpose, and meaning, and we in turn are given hope.

Mark, in recalling and penning the words of Jesus, reflects that hope in this apocalyptic passage. A hope proclaimed when it was most needed: when Jerusalem and the temple had been utterly destroyed; when the horrifying persecution was beginning to resurface; when false messiah’s walked the land saying “I am the risen Christ”; when false prophets turned religion into an almanac, proclaiming, “the signs are right, this is the end.” To a church caught between giving up their faith in despair or reaching for a

flicker of hope, Mark brought Jesus' message of hope. Mark here gives to the church not only a "heads up" in the sense of an alert or a warning, but also a call to hold our heads high in the expectation of good to come.

But this is also a clear message that hope is more than uninvolved waiting, that staring at the skies hoping to see some signs, to get some advance notice, is not true hope but is instead postponement, evasion, denial. Likewise looking on scenes of human misery and mouthing "this'll all be fixed when the messiah comes" is not true hope either. The message is clear that since we have true hope in the second Advent of Christ, we should get on with the work that waits to be done while we are waiting.

What kind of work? The proclamation of the kingdom, of the redemption offered in and through that same Christ who shared life with us. Proclamation both in word and in deed, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, clothing the naked, comforting the distressed. And what a load of work there is crying out to be done in the world. Today is World AIDS Day, and the ravages of that disease globally continue to be apocalyptic. While we tend to think of HIV/AIDS as a disease among gay people in North America, it is instead a global disease with characteristics not unlike the black plague that decimated Europe 500 years ago. In sub-Saharan Africa, as many as one person in three are infected. The impact upon families and upon children in particular is devastating. Once considered a male disease, now in Africa some 60% of the victims are women, and the impact is staggering. The women are traditionally the caregivers, and nurturers of the children, and so the children become orphans and the sick are left without care. Perhaps even worse is that women perform the primary role of agriculture, and with women unable to till the soil, to plant and to harvest there is rampant starvation adding to the incomprehensible death toll.

It is good to celebrate Christmas, and it is even good to do so with our familiar and well-loved symbols. But as we begin this Advent season, as we celebrate the coming of Jesus as a child "meek and mild", we must also acknowledge the Advent of his return in power and with judgment. We must look past the tender and gentle birth scenes into the uglier side of life. This is the non-pretty side of life in which Christ walked and to which he calls us to offer comfort, food, medicine, and loving compassion in his name.

What can we do? How can we fulfill the call to "heads up", to offer true hope to those who are suffering? There's a natural tendency to be overwhelmed by it all, to wring our hands and say, "we can't solve all this." It's true, we can't solve it all, especially if we don't even start. But we are a people of faith, and we hear and believe in the hope proclaimed in Christ's birth, death, and resurrection.

The hopeful answer is to do what we can, to begin somewhere, somehow. We can begin for example by affirming our stated belief in the power of prayer, and pray that as we offer ourselves in service to Christ who came and who will return he will fill us with his Spirit, and guide and direct us to discover those things we can accomplish that will best serve him and his kingdom.

We can also work toward a higher target of concreted support in the war against this disease. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has been active for almost two hundred years in these areas, working solidly and effectively to bring food, health care, education, moral and spiritual support to people in desperate need. We could, as a congregation, both increase the amount we agree to donate to Presbyterians Sharing and increase our sense of responsibility to fulfill that agreement. We can, as individuals, donate

specifically to Presbyterian World Service and Development through our offering envelopes, and be confident that all of that money will go to where it is most needed.

There is plenty else we can do at home as well. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, helping the homeless find shelter, comforting the lonely and grieving are all ways we can fruitfully pass the time waiting for the Lord's return. Bringing help to the helpless and hope to the hopeless are ways to hold our heads up while waiting. Inviting people to sit at the Lord's table so they may experience the joy of being part of Christ's hugely extended family.

These are but some practical ways to live out our true hope. These are ways we can hold our heads up high, fulfilled with a sense of purpose lived out. Holding our heads up high waiting with joyful anticipation the arrival of Christ, whether through a reenactment of the birth story or ultimately on the clouds in great glory. May God grant us the strength and wisdom to so live out our faith as to be able to hold our heads up as we await Christ's coming.