

### **“Joyful Anticipation” – Mk 13:24-37**

So, how many of you as we started to hear the Gospel reading said to yourself, “Why on earth right after that delightful candle-lighting ceremony are we hearing a passage with such doom and gloom?!” If you were one of those who felt that way then know that you are in good – and plentiful – company! Good grief – “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven ...”, these are really gloomy opening words set against the message of hope that is the theme for today. How does it all fit together? Well, I believe it actually does fit together, and maybe I can help you see how.

While this is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the church year in the lectionary cycle, in the secular world we have just passed Black Friday and Small Business Saturday. Tomorrow is Cyber Monday, and of course today is also Grey Cup Day. With Canadian football ending and the season of super sales officially under way and the lights lit on the trees at English Bay it seems we’re officially into the Christmas spirit!

That’s a bit early in one way, because in the church year the season of Christmas is technically the time after Dec. 24<sup>th</sup> but by then the rest of the world has moved on to New Year’s and other distractions. We celebrate 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 is 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 familiar and heart-warming and charming 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 – instead his second 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. Without judgment there is no need for redemption; with redemption judgment is overcome. Because of this momentous concluding event 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: Jerusalem and the temple had been

utterly destroyed; horrifying persecution was beginning to resurface; false messiah's walked the land saying "I am the risen Christ"; false prophets turned religion into an almanac, proclaiming, "the signs are right, this is the end." To a church caught between a rock and a hard place Mark brought Jesus' message of hope, the assurance that Christ has and will continue to be triumphant. 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.

"What I say to you I say to all", Jesus proclaimed, signifying that this was no secretive message known only to a few select individuals but a truth available to everyone with ears to listen. An encouraging message assuring that He would return, and that nobody but nobody could or would miss it. But also a demanding message, calling by its very nature for a response in faith from those who would listen. A message of true hope, that there is meaning to all of life, meaning given and declared by God himself. A message also that we are called to live our lives confident that when we are caught up in that defining end moment we will be preserved by Christ, by that very baby who shared not just the pretty parts of life with us but all of life, including its pains and sorrows as well.

We can also note that this is a clear message that hope is more than uninvolved waiting. Staring at the skies hoping to see some signs is not true hope but is instead postponement, evasion, denial. In the same way 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.

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 do this as individuals, but we can also work together as the larger church of Christ. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has been active in concrete support for those in need for almost two hundred years, working effectively to bring food, health care, education, and spiritual support to people in desperate need. We could, for example, 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. Continuing to feed 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 join with us at the Lord's table so they may experience the joy of being part of Christ's hugely extended family.

These are but a few of the ways we can live out the hope and meaning inherent in our waiting for Christ's ultimate return. As we 'kick off' (you knew I had to get at least one football idiom in here today, didn't you?!) this season of Advent we are once again reminded to keep awake in our faith, to be vigilant but not paralyzed as we joyfully wait for the surprise return of Christ.