

**“Expected Surprise” – Mk 13:24-37 – Nov 27, 2005**

Happy New Year! No, I didn't print off the wrong sermon for this morning – I merely wanted to be the first to wish you a Happy New Church Year. In the church year, reflected in the lectionary readings, today begins the church year anew with the First Sunday of Advent, marking the beginning of the lead-up to Christmas.

Of course, that lead-up to Christmas has already begun outside the church. The Christmas carols started on TV and radio right after Halloween, but I guess we can at least give thanks that the Americans celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November, meaning we are spared the full launch into a media-fuelled Christmas shopping season until now. That's just as well, because as popular as the Christmas season is, we're not quite there yet, with almost four weeks remaining (I haven't calculated the shopping days!).

One of the enduring Christmas images that has surfaced over the years thanks to Hallmark Cards, or perhaps Life Magazine (remember magazines? they were those hard-copy website simulations that used to get mailed out on a regular basis) – one of the enduring Christmas images was the idyllic picture of youngsters, dressed in pajamas, falling asleep hiding on the stairs waiting to catch a sneak peek at Santa Claus late on Christmas Eve. It was a metaphor for the good life in white North America – well housed, well-dressed, well-fed, little curly-blonde-haired-blue-eyed “Sally” and “Billy”, free from all harm and care, waiting innocently for a shower of gifts and blessings. No hint there of the hard times, pain and disappointments that would come later in life.

Unfortunately, that image is a metaphor for many in the Christian faith today as well. People who wait, half-asleep, for the return of Jesus, expecting that return to be like a rerun of that first Christmas night, or at least their dreamy image of that first Christmas night – a wondrous and soft story of a newborn babe laid in a manger, fresh sweet-smelling hay for a cushion, surrounded by lambs and pigs and doves and whatever smiling sweetly and talking gently to each other. A wondrous story, complete with gently singing angels and suddenly-reformed farm hands.

These are all wonderful elements upon which to focus. But we must not lose sight of the less-than-pretty realities of Jesus' birth story, because if we do we can too easily fall asleep in our faith, too easily fall into the trap of an “expected surprise”, a surprise that is no surprise at all. And just as the realities of Jesus' birth were surprising, and uncomfortable, and inconvenient, we are cautioned in our reading today to keep awake, or His second coming will not be a surprise even to us.

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. That this time, instead of an isolated birth in a remote town, his arrival will be literally earth-shaking, disrupting the cycle of days and seasons (Christmas, even, maybe!). 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. With this 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 ultimate hope in this apocalyptic (“end of time”) 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 messiahs walked the land saying “I am the risen Christ”; when false prophets turned religion into an almanac, proclaiming, “the signs are right, the End is Friday, at noon (12:30 in Newfoundland).” To a church caught between giving up their faith in despair or reaching for a flicker of hope, Mark brought Jesus’ message of hope.

“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.

That confident waiting to which we are called is not uninvolved waiting. The message is clear – since we have true hope in the second Advent of Christ, we should get on with the work that waits to be done.

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 most basic investigation reveals scenes as frightening as any graphic images of the apocalypse. 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 all too similar to the black plague that decimated Europe 1500 years ago. In Africa alone, tens of millions of people are infected, millions of orphaned children roam the streets. Education is in chaos as teachers are dying. Whole economies are being ravaged. Asia as well is experiencing the huge impact of this disease.

What do such stories of tragedy have to do with Christmas? Everything. 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. We must look past the tender and gentle birth scenes into the uglier side of life, the non-pretty side of life to which we called to offer comfort, and food, and medicine, and any other compassion and assistance that fits what Christ would call us to offer.

What can we do? How can we fulfill the call to “be awake”, 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 even begin to solve all this”. That is a reaction that not only fails to reflect the true hope of Jesus’ message, it reflects no hope at all.

The “true hope” answer is to do what we can while waiting the “expected surprise” of Christ’s return. While waiting, we can affirm 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 that we can accomplish that will best serve Him and His kingdom.

Moreover, while waiting we can work toward providing more support in the war against this dread disease. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has been active in these areas of the world for almost two hundred years, 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. As individuals we can 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.

At home we can, for example, support AIDS research, not just financially but through the support and encouragement of those who have the courage and strength to present themselves for testing of new drugs and procedures. A simple word of encouragement costs little but brings so much return.

These are but a few of the ways we can live out the hope and meaning inherent in our “expected surprise”, the return of Christ. As we ‘kick off’ (you knew I had to get at least one reference to the Grey Cup game 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 wait for the surprise return of Christ.