

WORSHIP

Sermon | 12.2.2018



Be Prepared

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Luke 21:25-36

On most Sundays, when one of us in a robe steps into this pulpit and asks you to stand up and say what it is you believe, you get up out of your pew and read (or recite) the Apostles' Creed – a statement of faith that dates back to when the people who followed Jesus didn't gather in crowds in large sanctuaries, but in groups in homes.

And on those weeks when we stand here and affirm our faith using the Apostles' Creed, one of the lines we read says, "The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we have entered a season of waiting; of preparation. And yes, part of that waiting is to celebrate the babe who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger...and to reflect upon what birth of Christ into our world says about God and what that means for our lives.

But the other waiting we practice in Advent – that gets particular emphasis on this first Sunday – is for what we say we believe...for that time when Christ will come again. As in back.

When Christ will return to finally usher in God's promised day.

To right what has been wrong.

To complete what God intended when he first looked at creation and called it good.

My guess is we don't think too much about that; about Jesus coming again.

We leave that kind of talk to those other kind of Christians.

But Jesus talked about it. A lot, actually. And today's second scripture is from a part of Luke's gospel where Jesus is urging his followers to prepare for the time when he would return.



To wait for it. To watch for it.

On this first Sunday of Advent, our gospel reading is from the 21st chapter of Luke. Listen with me for the word of God.

+ + +

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

+ + +

Be prepared.

That’s the Boy Scout motto.

I learned it well.

As a Boy Scout, being prepared meant making sure that you packed what you were going need on a campout. It meant that you had practiced the knots you were going to use to secure a tent or a canoe or a tarp for a shelter. That you had built some experience stacking a good campfire – a lean-to, with kindling at the bottom, and enough space for the oxygen to help the flames spread.

Boy Scouts taught me that being prepared was really about anticipation. The farther you can think ahead – and anticipate what may be required of you and what you might need – the better prepared you would be. That works well if you know what kind of future to expect.



Twelve years ago in this month when we had our first child, I learned that being prepared isn't always about anticipation, because there are some things that happen in your life that you just can't fully grasp or imagine, no matter how much you think you are ready.

The bag was packed.

The car seat already installed.

The nursery painted.

The electrical outlets all filled with those little plastic dohickies.

But when Lindsey looked over at me in 4:30 in the morning and said, "its time," I quickly found out there was more to preparation than just anticipating the stuff I might need.

The preparation I needed was for my heart – which got stretched in ways I could not imagine.

The preparation I needed was for my dreams – which immediately and forever changed because of a new-found reality that had so suddenly appeared in a 7 pound and 19-inch bundle cradled in my arms.

As wonderful as it was (and is), becoming a parent was disorienting, because what I thought I knew about the future turned out to be completely different. So I had to adjust my old ways of living to make space for something new.

+ + +

It's been my experience and observation that when it comes to being or feeling prepared, most of us act like Boy Scouts. We work to anticipate the stuff we think we will need for the future that we think we will be able to predict, because it doesn't look a whole lot different than the status quo of the present.

When we do that well, we get rewarded. So we learn the things we think we will need. And we develop habits that we think we will need. And we surround ourselves with the relationships and connections we think we will need. And we line out our finances and our insurance and our medical plans to anticipate the future so far as we can see it.

Jesus asks us to prepare in ways that go beyond anticipation – because the future that Jesus has in mind is different than what we have come to expect.

In many ways, what Jesus sees in the future is a reversal of what we've come to expect. And when Jesus comes again, that reversal is what he will bring. We get a sense of what that future holds when we look elsewhere in Scripture:

"They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and neither will they war anymore."



“Blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be satisfied...”

“Blessed are you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours”

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free...for all are one in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“The last will be first and the first last.”

That is the kind of future that Christ will bring when he returns.

In some ways, it is future we can't anticipate because it is one we haven't experienced. Not fully. Not yet.

But “there will be signs,” Jesus said. And in this morning's Scripture, the signs that Jesus mentions are vivid – changes in the sun, moon, stars, and seas. But there will other signs, too. That's why – when Jesus tries to describe what the Kingdom of God is like...what our world will be like when Christ comes again to set things right and as God intended...that's why Jesus tells parables

about Good Samaritans helping their sworn enemies,
and loving fathers offering forgiveness to their wayward sons,
and persistent widows sweeping the house looking for things that are lost,
because every thing matters.

Those stories that Jesus tells point to a different kind of future – one that is disorienting because it is so different than what we have come to know.

In the world we live in, enemies are pretty good at harming each other.

Forgiveness is not a first instinct.

And losing a few – especially if they are the least valuable – isn't so big of a deal.

Even today, though, if we pay attention, there are signs that break through and point to this different world.

I was reminded late this week, upon hearing of the death of President George Herbert Walker Bush, of the note he left on the Resolution Desk in the Oval Office for President Bill Clinton – the man who defeated him: “Your success is now our country's success,” Bush wrote, “I will be rooting for you.”

That's not a humility that defines the world in which we live. But one day it will.



In the swirl of the news this week about immigrants gathering at our southern border, I saw an image of an American camera man giving a Hondurian little girl a piggy back – a smile on her face in the midst of the squalor of a refugee camp guarded by men with guns...none of which she chose.

That joy in the midst of uncertainty and conflict and despair is not something that defines the world in which we live. But one day it will.

Last year in Raleigh a new restaurant called A Place at the Table opened up. A non-profit organized by a 26-year-old NC State graduate, the restaurant uses a pay-as-you-can model. If you can pay, you do. If you can pay just a little, you do. If you can't pay, you can work for 15 minutes and then have the dignity of eating a restaurant meal.

There aren't a lot of dining room tables filled with people across the socio-economic spectrum in the world we live in. But one day there will be.

There will be signs, Jesus said.

Signs that signal a different world that Jesus bring when he returns.

And from the Scripture, we get the sense that to some, those signs might be foreboding. That the change that will occur might not come as good news. My guess is, that's somewhat true for those – like me and maybe you – who tend to benefit from the way things are...who have done a lot to anticipate and prepare for a future where things continue on the current trajectory.

Sometimes we don't want to see the signs because we are not sure we want things to change.

And other times, we miss the signs because we are worn down by the ways things are, and we don't have energy to imagine that things could be different. We've had too much disappointment. We've tried too hard and too long to impact this world in the ways we that we know are what God would want – but the change is too small – and it leaves us feeling defeated.

My guess is that there is a little bit of both those things going on within us – we are both invested in the world the way it is, and we are worn down by the world the way it is. So that even if change does come, we might miss the signs of its coming.

+ + +

My transition into this Advent season of preparation and waiting happened earlier this week in Chicago. I was gathered with a small group of colleagues to talk church. On Tuesday evening we spent a couple of hours at the Art Institute of Chicago, where a friend had set us up with a docent to give us a tour of religiously themed pieces.



One exhibit that the Art Institute has during Advent and Christmas each year is a Neapolitan crèche – a nativity scene – from the mid-1700s. It is beautiful and massive, in a glass-enclosed Baroque case – with 200 figures carved by hand. The crèche has the figures you would expect in a nativity – Mary and Joseph, Jesus, the wise men, the angels. But the backdrop melds two worlds – the world in which Jesus was born, and the much later world in which the artists lived. Besides the regular nativity figures, it has other, contemporary, additions. There are merchants and blacksmiths and butchers. Philosophers. Mothers with their children. Neighbors gathered at street corners engaged in conversation. It took me a while, but what I noticed is that outside of Mary and Joseph and the angels – almost every other person in the crèche is looking away from the manger. The sense you get is that they are absorbed in life. Some weighed down by it. Others enjoying it a little too much. One man was asleep.

Yet there were also a few people who had their heads turned toward Christ – who seemed to recognize what was happening in the midst of their world. Their expression was one of joy and expectation.

Of all the figures in that crèche, those few faces turned toward the manger were the ones who made a lasting impression. Because when you pay attention – and catch a glimpse of the often quiet, subtle ways that God breaks into our world – it can lead to us living differently.

Which can help us stretch our hearts.

And change our dreams.

And help us believe that there will a different future.

The late William Sloan Coffin, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, once told his congregation that he didn't want the church to be an institution for things religious. He wanted it to be a place full of people who "irrigated the community with hope."

What a beautiful vision for us as God's people.

Not to change this world on our own with our ideas – we can't do that.

But to trust that God is charge of the future – a future where things will be made well – and just – and peaceable – and whole.

To water the ground wherever with go with that sense of hope – so that the signs of the coming kingdom can grow...

in order that we might be prepared when Christ comes.

