

## Waiting in Hope

Mark 13:24-31 | Corinthians 1:3-9

*"I wait for the Lord. My soul waits for the Lord, more than the watchman for the dawn...O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with God there is steadfast love."*

*"Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word will not pass away."*

We are about to hear a whole lot about having a "perfect Christmas". Many folk want to tell us exactly what to do, what to buy, how to dress ourselves, how to decorate the tree, the house so that it will be a flawless holiday. And if we listen to all that, if we let ourselves be bounced around by all the 'to-ing and fro-ing" over having a "perfect" day, we will endure needless stress – and likely miss the point of the whole season.

So I would like to talk with you this morning about having a good Advent, instead of worrying about a perfect Christmas. Advent in the life of the Christian church is the season leading up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is the season of anticipation, looking forward to God's gift to us of the Christ. It is the season of getting ready for the arrival of the Messiah, the king. And on this first Sunday in Advent, we are especially aware of the promises that the one who came to Bethlehem, will return for us one day. If he came once, he will come again. Advent is about the future of Jesus. A future we wait for in hope.

Now Scripture has two ways of talking about the end of all things, and the second coming of the king.

The first is the doom and gloom type of apocalyptic literature. We get some of that in Mark's gospel in chapter 13. We also find it in Daniel, and the Book of Revelation. It contains the frightening scenes of earthquakes and famine, of stars falling from the skies, of the ocean roaring and the moon turning to blood. "There will be wars and rumors of war". The antichrist shall appear and 666 will be his number. We have all heard these passages, and they are the regular fodder for late night radio preachers. Fear gets people's attention.

We know from our Bible study, that these passages are written during the worst of times. They appear during the exile in Babylon, or the oppression of the Greek monarchs; they appear during the persecution that Rome visits upon the early Christians.

The message of this kind of apocalyptic literature is simple: awful stuff is going to happen. But God is still in charge. You are going to go through some terrible times, but hang on, for God has not given up on you. While telling of the woes, they promise that God is still the one who will bring the final victory.

Of course, we have our own apocalyptic literature flowing freely these days. Some write about the earthquakes, the tsunamis, global warming and declare that the end is near. Others see prophecy fulfilled in battles over Palestine and modern Jerusalem. They seem to egg on the combatants, hoping this will bring the Messiah sooner. Others get their apocalyptic reading

from the Wall Street Journal: the end of Lehman brothers; the collapse of MF Global. Greece can't pay its debts. The euro is in trouble. Surely the sky is falling.

Doom and gloom may help some people "get religion", but mostly it makes people want to give up; to hide; to build a little fort out of their own family, their house, their own neighborhood and hide inside it. It makes them want to build a small boat with their own funds, and then if the ship goes down, maybe the lifeboat will hold us. It seems to shrink the world down to my little turf. There is a lot out there that makes us want to go home, lock the door, turn off the tv and just hide out. And if you search around in the Bible, you can find some texts that seem to say that is what we are to do.

But that does not lead to a good Advent. In our Advent Scriptures we are told to wait for the Messiah with hope and expectation. Having met Jesus of Nazareth, who touched the lepers, ate with Zaccheus the tax collector, blessed the children, prayed for his enemies – having met the man of Nazareth as God's love given to the world, we look forward to more of the same. We look forward to his kingdom that will be a place of welcome, forgiveness, mercy, and kindness.

Advent is about learning to wait in hope. If we read only the gloom and doom passages, that gets hard to do.

For there is another kind of vision found in scripture that also deals with the future. There are other apocalyptic passages about the future of the Messiah that have a very different tone. See if these sound familiar to you.

"One day the lion will lie down with the lamb, the wolf with the calf, and a little child shall play safely near the hole of the snake. They will do no harm because the earth shall be as full of the knowledge of God as the sea is full of water. "

"One day a child shall be born, a son shall be given to us, and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And he will rule with fairness, and justice, with righteousness and mercy. He will gather the flock and protect it, he will carry the lambs in his arms."

"One day they shall beat their swords into plows, their spears into pruning hooks. The nations shall not study war anymore. Everyone will live beneath vine and fig tree, in peace and unafraid. "

These also are Advent scripture lessons. They help us get ready for the future of Jesus and his kingdom.

Out of this vision of the future, Jesus teaches his followers to love God and one another. They are to forgive 70 x 7, because life is too short to carry grudges. They are to pray for those who persecute them, knowing that God is going to bring something good out of the worst of times. Out of these prophecies Jesus teaches his followers to believe that God's love is from

everlasting to everlasting on those who trust in God. “Heaven and earth may pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Jesus is not the captain of life boats for the few who can get through the great troubles. He is the God’s love for us in the flesh, in person. He came once in our story. He will be there at the end as well. Whether he comes here for us, or we go to meet him – he is the end, the goal, the grand finale in our story. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And the way of Jesus is to go on being people of patience and hope, of joy and thanksgiving, of generosity and mercy.

Christian faith is about hope. It is about the future of Jesus. We live now by what we are looking forward to. A good Advent is a time to breathe in the daily presence of God and to trust that tomorrow is in God’s hands.

So we act out the values of our Messiah, our future king. We open up the church this week to CARITAS. We will make homeless families welcome here. We will sit at table with them, read stories to their children, watch the ballgame on TV like family; like God’s family. That is a good Advent.

We will go caroling out in the dark, singing about the Light of the World. We will knock on the doors of some of our elderly, some of our shut-ins and let them know that they are not forgotten. That is a good Advent.

We will sit at table with our own families, and read through the stories that lead up to the birth of Jesus. We will help our children understand that love is a daily gift, and that joy comes with sharing this gift. That is a good Advent.

We will live by the words of the psalmist “I wait for the Lord. My soul waits for the Lord.” By taking time to pray, to sit by the window and just be grateful, to listen for the still small voices of angels we have heard on high – we will make room in our lives, our schedules, our hearts for God’s Messiah to come in. That is a good Advent.

So let us have a good Advent together. Let us worship in hope, let us breathe in some peace; let us sing for joy, let us practice generosity. Let us not count shopping days, but count openings of the Spirit to do something good. Let us remember the least of these, now and year round, because we know that they are important to the king who is coming.

So there are two kinds of prophecies about the second coming of the king. Both kinds of apocalyptic, end of the world literature end up at the same place. God is in charge, and God is going to write the final scenes of this story. We do not have to worry about making everything turn out right. God will do that.

My soul waits for the Lord, more than the watchman for the dawn. O people of God, hope in the Lord, for with God there is steadfast love and mercy.

Dr. Charlie Summers

Reflection: What is one place this week you can practice some of Advent's hopeful waiting; some patience and peace instead of holiday rush and hurry?