

Sermon

“Our Heart Beating Strong”

December 1st, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

1st Sunday of Advent

Based on Matthew 24:36-44

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶ “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: As we have come to your Word this day, O God, make peace in our hearts so that we may truly hear you, and follow you, for it is in serving you that we discover who we are called to be, and also find life abundant; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Advent Begins

The season of Advent is here my friends. It’s time to celebrate a period of weeks between now and Christmas that is marked by a spirit of expectation, anticipation, and preparation for something (or *someone*, to be more precise) that is coming. And, for some quick background and reminders ... the word “advent” in today’s English language comes from the Latin word “adventus,” which means coming or arrival, as in the arrival of something important or something that we have been waiting on for a really long time. While Thanksgiving and Black Friday may herald the beginning of the consumer Christmas shopping season, the first

Sunday of Advent marks the beginning, the arrival, of the church's Christmas season and the preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus—of Emmanuel, which means “God with us.”

Going further, the Latin word “adventus” is the translation of the Greek word “Parousia,” which is commonly used in reference to the second coming of Christ. This is why the first Sunday of Advent each year includes mysterious and cryptic scripture passages from the gospels as a way of providing context for the season of Advent—that it is signaling the end of something old *and* the birth of something new. You see, Advent season serves as both a reminder of the waiting and the arrival of our Lord and Savior, the Messiah, (which *has* happened) and the waiting for our Lord to come again (which *will* happen)—a dual reminder of both past and future. But, the fine point of the matter is this—to over emphasize the next coming at the expense of the first coming can lead a believer to completely miss the point.

Echoing last week's sermon theme of God always being with us, a Catholic priest named Richard John Neuhaus puts it like this: “Christ came, Christ comes, Christ will come again. There is no time—past, present, or future—in which Jesus the Christ is not God with us. He was with you yesterday, is with you today, and will be with you tomorrow.”¹

Jesus' Message is for Everyone

Indeed, Jesus the Christ, God in the flesh, “God with us,” is with each and every one of us every moment of our lives. But, what seems most interesting in today's gospel reading from Matthew is that such knowledge takes a backseat to *action*. The language used in this passage—specifically the verbs—along with the use of multiple metaphors, is almost poetic. And, the metaphors involve familiar stories, from the historical narratives of the Hebrew Torah to common, ordinary tasks of everyday people, that all reinforce Jesus' main message that the need for *doing* over the need for *knowing* is for every single person in all times and all places.

First, in the context of God's covenant with Noah, Jesus describes the people

¹ Pennoyer, Greg and Wolfe, Gregory, eds. (2007). *God With Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press. p.19.

in their “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”—symmetrical images about ordinary tasks of being alive and living in community. Then, there are dual stories—one about men and one about women—that provide further clarity that Jesus’ message is intended for absolutely everyone ... you, me, men, women, and people of all ages who eat and drink and breathe and live on this earth. And, the additional metaphors of being “in the field” and “grinding a meal together” serve to emphasize that it is definitely within our regular, ordinary lives that God works in and through and among us.

Finally, the metaphor of the “thief in the night” is used effectively to bring Jesus’ words full circle to his original point—that knowing the time is not important, but what is important is what we are doing until that time comes. The significance of the thief metaphor is not the thief himself or the hour that the thief comes to steal, but rather that had the owner of the house known a thief was coming then he would have stayed awake to prevent any theft. Jesus’ point is that, like the owner, we “must be ready” at all times because we simply do not know the day or hour Jesus will come.

Kingdom People

Friends, fellow children of God, on this first Sunday of Advent, Jesus is essentially asking us to be, what I like to call, “kingdom people.” Kingdom people are common, ordinary Christ-followers like you and me who are *ready*, who are *filled* with expectation and anticipation, and who are *prepared* to do what God would have us do for God’s kingdom, here and now. Kingdom people are faith-filled people—not because we have everything figured out with certainty, but because we know that God does. In fact, today’s scripture shows us that uncertainty seems to be a condition of faith—even Jesus himself claims to not know everything—that only God does.

Indeed, Jesus’ intent in this passage is to prompt his followers to *action*—that our purpose is not to speculate or calculate when the Lord will come again, but instead we are called to action because he already did come to us in the manger—that being prepared for the Lord’s coming is to “do” the acts of ministry that Jesus already models for us. This means doing Christ-like deeds of mercy, showing

forgiveness to one another, and sharing God’s peace and love to the world—to actually *be* kingdom people! Because we are called to a life of work and faith as we wait with watchfulness and anticipation.

One Bible commentator named Mark Yurs aptly points out that, “We are not expected to know everything, but we are expected to do something—here and now—in the ordinary places of human endeavor where life is lived. Whatever else Christians may be, we are a work force in this world.”² And, in perfect summary of Jesus’ main point, another commentator, David Bartlett, writes, “One day Jesus may appear in the clouds, suddenly, like a thief in the night. But before that—as Matthew reminds us—Jesus will appear just around the corner, suddenly, like a hungry person, or a neighbor ill-clothed, or someone sick or imprisoned.”³ Indeed, as kingdom people, Jesus charges and reminds each of us, “we must be ready.”

Emmanuel—“God With Us”

In closing, I want to share one more thought with you about knowing versus doing—about having certainty versus having faith ... Over the years, I’ve been captivated by stories about family members of organ donors bonding with transplant recipients. I have to say, I’m fascinated by stories like this. One such story that has always stuck with me was about a mother who tragically lost her son. Her son was an organ donor, and his heart went to a man and it saved the man’s life. After many months passed, the mom who lost her son contacted the man who received her son’s heart, and he agreed to meet with her. When she went to his home, he met her at the door and welcomed her with open arms. As she hugged the man and he held her head to his chest, she could feel her son’s heart beating against her ear. And, her son’s heart was beating strong!

Now, I’ve too often heard during my years of ministry that people *just know* for certain that the church is dying, that the end is coming, and so on and so forth. Well, I’m here to tell you today that we—all of us, here—are kingdom people who

² Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown (2010). *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A Volume 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. p.25.

³ Ibid p.24

know not to waste time speculating on what only God knows—on only what God can conceive.

Once again, Catholic priest Richard John Neuhaus provides the words for us: “God is, quite literally, inconceivable. And that is why God was conceived as a human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Because we cannot, even in thought, rise up to God, God stooped down to us in Jesus, who is ‘Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God with us.’”⁴

The season of Advent is here my friends. It’s time to celebrate the coming of God into the world; to celebrate that God is indeed with us; to celebrate being called to action to make a difference in this world; and to celebrate that God continues to stoop down to us in Jesus. And, when Jesus puts his arms around us—around his kingdom people gathered together as his body in this world—Jesus hears our heart beating strong!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁴ Pennoyer, Greg and Wolfe, Gregory, eds. (2007). *God With Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press. p.17.