
RECOVERING HOPE

Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

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I don't think our church is ever more out of sync with the culture than on this first Sunday of Advent. The Christmas shopping season is in full swing, carols are playing in all the stores, sleigh bells and mistletoe are the order of the day. And here in the church we usher in the penitential season of Advent with reflections on the end of the world. People want to feel good during the holidays, and apocalyptic predictions just don't fit the bill.

All year long, after all, we get beat down with distressing headlines and intractable problems. With unemployment still hovering above 9% and police turning on the Wall Street protestors, we have serious commentators worrying that a pre-emptive attack on Iran will spark global conflict, even as the implosion of the Euro-zone economy drags the world into the Second Great Depression.

We could all use a little relief from the distressing headlines, and what better place to find it than the warmth and good cheer of the Christmas season. I've always thought the artwork of Thomas Kinkade captures so well what we look for in the holidays.

Take a look at this little Christmas cottage. You can just tell that everyone inside is healthy and well-adjusted. The children never fight with each other, none of the relatives ever shows up drunk at the dinner table, and the dog never pees on the carpet. This is what we're looking for, isn't it--a quiet refuge from the storm, a few days of sheltered retreat where our problems can recede into the background and for a few moments everyone can feel warm and happy.



Ironically, this quest for the perfect holiday puts enormous pressure on us. It takes huge amounts of energy to keep all the less-than-perfect aspects of our lives hidden out of sight, even for a few days. And if, despite our best efforts, our troubles come creeping out of the cellar and show up at Christmas dinner, we feel like failures and their burden weighs upon us all the more.

And for the majority of us whose lives simply don't match the Hallmark Card template of mom, dad and the wide-eyed children gathered around the Christmas tree, all this holiday spirit can leave us feeling sad and lonely more than at any other time of year. Those perfect holiday images turn toxic, imposing upon us the burden of a make-believe ideal that serves mainly to leave us exhausted and depressed.

Perhaps the ancient church knew what it was doing when, at the beginning of Advent, it directed us to texts which face the problems of the world head-on. Our Old Testament lesson this morning has the Israelites both admitting their problems and complaining about them to God. "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*" they cry.¹ There are no starry-eyed, fairytale visions here, no desperate attempts to sweep unpleasant realities under the rug. These ancient Jews look reality squarely in the eye and realize they need a Savior.

Their example suggests a different kind of holiday observance for us. Advent is not a time for sweeping unpleasant reality under the rug. Advent is the liberating opportunity to let go of all the defensive denials and evasions we have built up over the past year, to face squarely the truth about the world and our own lives. Advent gives us permission to stop running from reality, to cease acting as if we have all the fixes in hand and everything is under control.

Yes, our problems and failures weigh heavily upon our shoulders. But their weight is nothing compared to the burden of pretending that our problems and failures don't exist! Advent invites us to cast off the yoke of self-deception and make friends with truth again, to admit that all is not right with ourselves and our world, and to cry out to heaven for help. "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*" Advent is about remembering that we need a Savior.

Now there is one huge difference between us and the ancient Israelites whose lamentations we read this morning. Between their time and ours, God really did tear open the heavens and come down: "*The Word become flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.*"²

The Lord tore open the heavens and came down, yet two thousand years late our world and our own lives still know a lot of troubles. It is for this reason that the ancient church directs us in this season to the continuation and fulfillment of that hope which comes to us in the birth of the Christ child. God acting to deliver us from all the trials and troubles which oppress us is not an event that is confined to the past. Son of Man will come again "*in clouds with great power and glory.*"³ The seeds of the Kingdom that were planted with Christ's initial coming will flower and blossom into a glorious harvest. The love and justice and peace and goodness that radiated from the Galilean carpenter will one day transform this groaning world of ours and fill the very cosmos to overflowing.

It can sound like wishful thinking and fairy tales. But the one who proclaimed this message is risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God, and for that reason we recognize his promise of the coming Kingdom as a hope that comes with indelible divine assurances. It is a promise you can stake your life on.

¹Isaiah 64:1 (NRSV)

²John 1:14 (RSV)

³Mark 13:26

Now the challenge we face with the Advent season is that this promise can seem to have very little to do with us. There's a temptation to lapse into play-acting as we all "wait" for the birth of the Christ child on December 25th. And so in a similar way, we can get into the mode of pretend-waiting for Christ's second coming, without ever really taking it seriously. What are the odds of our being there to see it, after all?

Well good Christians, the odds of our being there are roughly 100 percent. We will see it together, because Jesus second coming will be accompanied by the general resurrection. That means it doesn't matter if he returns in our lifetimes, you and I will be there. Death is our gateway into Jesus' Second Coming. When you and I lay ourselves down for that final sleep, our chance for preparations in this life will be over, and our next appearance on this earth WILL BE the day when Christ has appeared in glory and the fullness of his promises are coming to pass.

Our entry into this great hope can catch us off guard. Some of us may in fact be overtaken by death in the coming year. It can happen without our seeing it coming. It will come eventually to each one of us, and this brings us to Jesus' urgent teaching about how to conduct ourselves in the meantime: "*What I say to you I say to all,*" he says. "*Watch.*"

What does that mean? What does this watching look like, which is our proper response to the coming Kingdom? At a minimum it means being aware that we are frail, mortal creatures who at any time may find ourselves face to face with eternity. But this watching is a much more hopeful undertaking than that.

Watching for Christ's coming keeps us aware us that the final triumph of love and peace and goodness is coming just as surely as our Lord is risen from the dead. We have glimpsed the joy that awaits at the end of the story, and that knowledge changes us. It means we have lost our ability to become hopeless or cynical or despairing at no matter how dark our present circumstances may appear. Even when we grieve, we do not grieve as those who are without hope.

Watching for Christ's coming gives us the courage to stand for love and goodness even when the stand is costly and the cause seems lost. Every tiny spark of mercy and goodness and humanity that shines in our darkened world will be vindicated when Christ returns in glory. And that means we can embody love even when love seems impractical. We can do something beautiful for God even when the payoff appears nonexistent.

In this connection I think of Mother Teresa's ministry, which consistent in dragging penniless beggars out of the gutters of Calcutta in order to give them a place of care and comfort as they were dying. What difference does an act like that make, providing one beggar a few hours of comfort at the end of life? And yet Mother Teresa's mission was radiant with the power of God.

I think one of the great dangers we face at Christmastime is the deadly temptation to make peace with the world as it is. The world puts on its shiniest face in this season and entices us with a lot of dazzle and glitter. In the midst of the holiday rush, the devil sneaks in and tempts us with the thought that maybe, just maybe we can settle for what the world has to offer. Maybe those new diamond earrings or that fancy electronic gadget sitting under the tree really are enough. Maybe a few nice things is what life is really all about. We'd be naïve to hope for anything beyond that. So the world would have us believe.

Many of us can remember times when the lights of hope and idealism were shining brightly in our hearts. But the world beats us down. We see reformers fall to earth and ideals fade. Those of us who have been around for awhile have done our share of wrestling with intractable problems. We have tripped over our

share of glittering dreams that disappoint. The world has turned us into jaded realists, the fires of hope which once burned in our hearts now flicker and fade.

Well I am here to tell you brothers and sisters that it is the idealists among us who are in touch with reality, because the triumph of God's love and God's goodness is coming. The Kingdom of heaven is at hand. The powers of death and hell have been defeated, and the only rational response is joyous hope and fearless optimism. Advent is the time to rekindle those fires of hope that once burned brightly in all our hearts, because Christ is coming with power and great glory. *"What I say to you, I say to all. Watch."*

This watching is not just an idle dream of pie in the sky by and by. Christ's coming Kingdom is already present among us in hidden form. Jesus' own ministry was the dawning of its light, and the workings of the Holy Spirit in us and among us provide glimpses and foretastes of its life-giving power. The signs are all around us if we just have the eyes to see.

The Holy Spirit calls us together, plants faith in our hearts and unites us to Christ and to one another as a sign of what is coming. We are pilgrims and sojourners, you and I, travelers bound together in fellowship with one another, because we are citizens of a coming Kingdom and this world is not our home.

We pray and we watch and we see-- passions for that homeland welling up in many hearts, and our people gather together to build outposts of justice and compassion and peace in this world as signs of the world that is coming.

We pray and we watch and we see—strangers welcomed and compassion extended to persons who are sick or lonely or disturbed, and in these things we recognize the glimmerings of that love and mercy which will one day rule the cosmos.

We pray and we watch and we see—welling up in our own hearts the glowing sparks of a love and kindness and generosity that's different from what we've known before. We recognize there Jesus' own love planted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit as an advancing front of the Kingdom that is coming.

These hearts which Christ gives us allow us to love in ways that are both very big and very small. We dare to dream of the big things— of global reconciliation, peace among the nations, and a world where no child goes to bed hungry. We also recognize in the little things—the cup of cold water offered to a tiny child who is thirsty—sparks of divine life that have cosmic significance.

Give thanks, good Christians, and be of good hope, for salvation is closer now than it was when we first believe. The signs of what is coming are all around us—this is the season for learning to see and rejoice in them again. What Christ says to you he says to all. Watch.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.