



"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

December 3, 2017

First Sunday of Advent

1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

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Signs of Promise

I'm counting down the days. 23 more, plus four hours and 53 minutes, to be exact. If we're quick at addition and subtraction we might suggest a brush-up on my 2nd grade math skills! 22 days until Christmas. Except by that night, we'll have traveled far by car, through a couple of airports, and then likely be shifting and turning, legs cramped and neck crooked, awkwardly and uncomfortably unable to sleep on an overnight flight. And on December 26th, I'll get to see my daughter! One of the best Christmas gifts I can imagine! Better than that electric slot car racing set I always longed for as a kid, or all the space Lego I ever received, which meant in its day, Christmas had come! This year, I imagine something like the arrivals gate in the movie *Love Actually*. I'll be fully awake, adrenaline flowing, alertly scanning, watching and waiting to see her smile, hugs, kisses ... I expect that's when Christmas will come for me. And whenever I glimpse my duffel bag, or travel toiletries, a piece of clothing I might pack, or some planning detail comes up in conversation, I know that time is drawing near! I wonder when Christmas will come for you.

That trip has changed other family Advent / Christmas preparations this year. Candles in the windows, and tree up earlier than ever before, last Saturday, because it's coming down Christmas morning. No pressure to buy presents, all money went to those plane tickets. Our preparations this year meant adjusting expectations in many ways. We'll miss being with extended family on Christmas Day. Still it seems the differences and somewhat released pressures bring new freshness. Like the whole new world of musical possibilities I discovered this year through the miracle

of Spotify! Though it can seem a bit strange to change familiar routines and branch out beyond much beloved CDs, I delight in these signs of the season.

Yesterday morning we prepared signs in here, too—wreaths, garland, lights. The enwreathed angel above the central doors in the back proved to be a real-life joke about how many Presbyterians it takes ... two ministers, plus at least three or four others tried, off and on, to fix her wings, fluff her dress, hang her straight, and hold her horn ... for virtually the whole two hours. As we're greeting one another sometime in weeks ahead, I dearly hope she doesn't follow the way of Satan – the so-called *fallen* angel!

[Wait a minute! That's not the one we worked on! {... discovery that the angel has been replaced by another and I don't know where it went ... abandoned? Repaired? Stored away? ...}]

As we worked on our Advent candle wreath, she asked about colors of the season – blue for night sky at Jesus' birth. For her, she said that the candle flame was the most meaningful and moving sign. There it is kindled from nothing, steady yet flickering slightly, multiplying through weeks ahead. Light in the darkness. We thought about how we share these symbols and yet, amid surely differing decorating preferences, something strikes each of us personally. All of it together and each individual part ... a sign. At best, touching our heart with the spirit of the Season.

That's clearly how the crowd felt last night when WMU choirs filled these walls and windows with music—students packing the whole front steps, loft, transepts, singing “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” from the balcony. Other musical groups will follow in weeks ahead, as we welcome guests with Christ's Love in our sanctuary of grace and peace. This place, people gathered, each musical experience, beautiful signs of the season for our city. All building toward our moment of great anticipation, here on Christmas Eve when we come to this table again, listen to bells

ring in a holy birth, and sing Silent Night by candlelight. Thanks to the church calendar set many centuries ago, and thanks to all that fills our personal calendar we know when Jesus will come among us! It's pretty clear. We've responsibly planned and prepared. We like it that way. And I can't wait!

Except that's not how Mark portrays it all. He pretty clearly warns: about that day and hour, no one knows! That must have been a rude awakening, a hard realization to accept. Good news? This tension gets laced throughout the gospels. As Mark tells the story, Jesus assures his closest friends and followers that he'll go away, but will return soon. Your generation, he promises, will not pass away before I come again.

God's reign of grace and peace will be fulfilled completely in our lifetime, they expected. For those purposes, Jewish compatriots started an armed rebellion against Rome. But that only got the holy temple destroyed; and their beloved homes and freedom and promised land more tightly possessed by foreign armies. Eventually more and more people died. Fewer and fewer of those who knew Jesus could still tell the stories. So, someone had the bright idea to get them all written down. Think about it. Just starting to put pen to paper meant accepting their great expectation might not be true. The simple fact we have these accounts to read in our time is a testament to both disappointment and hope, and ultimately trust and faith that just maybe it will be true one day.ⁱ

Scholars tell us that Mark was likely the first gospel written. Here's how Barbara Brown Taylor describes what must have been his task. "He had to tell [the gospel story] to people who were frightened and tired of waiting—people who desperately wanted to know whether Jesus' delay was part of the master plan or whether he was missing in action. Was he really coming back to pull them from the edge of the abyss or were they just going to hang there until their fingers gave out and they fell onto the mounting pile of bodies at the bottom."ⁱⁱ

Friends, there's much I don't know about what gospel writers meant to convey, and what Jesus actually said and did. John says these are signs that we might come to believe. I'm still working on that. Still when I listen and share your life, it begins to make some sense. You see, we too know something of struggle with disappointment and hope. We long to trust God's master plan of love revealed for us in Jesus. We gaze into the abyss of noise and strife in life, as we see and hear and feel it. A health diagnosis, financial pressure, stress at work, another night on the street. The loss of a beloved or family conflict made poignant again at the holidays. The fall from pedestals of respect for so many icons and institutions of our culture. The threat of nuclear missiles multiplying in the hands of leaders whose stability we question. Best it seems the Bible can offer is Jesus promising: Fear not, I'll be back. But keep awake, for you don't know when. Only God knows.

Of course, many people try some secret formula to calculate Jesus' date of return. They plan, prepare, proclaim and count down ... to great disappointment, when they wake up to a beautiful sunny day like this and the world still bustling about its normal routines. It may seem easy to criticize such misguided flights of fancy. And such escapist hopes laced with absolute determination about who's flying to heaven or burning in hell is *not* faith I believe Jesus tries to empower in us.

Still, though we conceive it differently, we all want to experience God's presence and power and grace and purposes amid the noise and strife of life. So how do we make sense of and live faithfully in the great mystery of faith we proclaim every time we celebrate communion: that Christ has come and died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. How do the incarnation / resurrection / return, from first coming to the second coming, as our Christian faith has called it over the years ... how do it all connect? Mark sees it as a kind of eternal loop. He doesn't end his gospel like the others with stories of sharing a meal on the road or beside a sea, intimate encounters

in detail, or glorious visions. The way Mark tells us about resurrection, Jesus says to his disciples as they stand with fear and trembling is to go home, back to Galilee. That's where they'll see him. That's where they can expect to find him among them in the ordinary places and routines and relationships of everyday life. That's the expectant promise God gives to all of us in the metaphorical fig tree amid a darkened sun and moon, falling stars and quaking powers.

Now this is probably where we need to pause and think about difference between expectation and expectancy. That's what we discussed recently while thinking about marriage and life together, and looking for God's way of love for them through it all. We try to live with expectancy, with our heart set on the kind of life and experiences we long for, and pray for, and seek together. Without being too set on specific defined expectations of what that life will be like. You see, friends, sometimes we have the right general idea about what's good and right and true in life. But we get too over-confident, we get caught—stressed and frustrated and disappointed—because we define, too clearly, exactly what that goodness will be like, without considering other possibilities. So, when it doesn't turn out exactly as we envision ... big problems.

It's like my big life lesson with that race car set. Maybe I've shared this story with a few before. It's indelibly imprinted upon my soul, for better now as years go by. But it was for worse that Christmas when I was probably nine or ten. You know the routine. Whether we're actually asked, or not, we tell our parents ... I really wanted that racing set. I told them and told them. Christmas comes, one present left always the best one, right? Big package. I rip it open. Can't wait. Sure it's going to be glorious. And it's ... a bike basket! A bike basket?! ... and I didn't even ask for it!

The gift I received that year was learning about having specific expectations, and setting our heart too definitively on them. It's a valuable gift that we humans tend to

be “given” again and again. Real trouble goes beyond just disappointment. When we set our hearts on something too specifically defined, we miss the goodness, the beauty, the gift in many other moments along the way. Tragic irony is that when we focus too intently on *achieving* our expectations, we often miss God coming among us. Faithful preparations often mean adjusting expectations.

Now here’s where we connect back to Jesus’ coming among us—knowing exactly when Christmas will come and what it will look like—time all calculated, experience ready to be implemented. Except there’s a different kind of time, really an experience within every moment, for which the Bible tries to prepare us. Keep awake, Jesus says, for you do not know the time. But you will see things taking place, signs that promise the Holy One is near.

Friends, there can be so much to cherish in this beautiful and exciting time of year. And there can be much pressure and anxiety amid the stresses and expectations of this time of year. Are we alert to what really matters in living faith? Mark imagines small signs of hope that Jesus will appear amid realities of chaos and uncertainty. That’s good news for us. We may not be in danger of drowsiness amid all we have to do. In fact, we may not be able to sleep very well, through whatever our stresses or concerns. We may have made room in our lives for the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. Or we’ve already made room (in the form of tickets) for the next Star Wars movie. Through all our other plans and preparations, make room in our hearts and minds and patterns of living for Holy Love in Christ to come among us.

Maybe for us that moment will come at a holiday concert or theatre production. Maybe it’s an annual gathering with family or friends, or a special connection, out of the blue, that seemed impossible. There will be a moment of beauty, a relationship or glimpse of community, when goodness and possibility inspire us. There will be a moment of opportunity, in stores or on roads or in routines of our

homes, when grace and patience move us. There will be a moment of concern, for someone else or our society beyond our selves, when compassion and sacrificial generosity flow from us. There will be a moment when our longing for true peace in the fullness of unconditional, unjudgmental, unending Love rises from somewhere deep inside us.

God promises to be with us in Christ. Sometimes amid the chaos and conflicts and troubles of our lives, it's hard for us to believe (to give our heart to) that promise. Dear friends, let's be clear. The signs of promise are not the chaos, the fear, the hurt, the conflict, the great social problems themselves. The signs of promise come to us in unexpected graces, and how we respond.

She shared with me the latest in her family conflict, going on for years now. How she went back to her dearly beloved childhood home again, even with the cloud of such a public rift so strong. She settled into a church pew one Sunday morning. Moments later her kin and erstwhile enemy came over and said, "you know I will always love you." Even more than a note or email, it was face to face, in public. "You know I will always love you." That's a gift. That's a sign—not the conflict itself rather the reconciliation we know in Christ. Best I can tell, that's the promise God tries to give every one of us, all the time. "You know I will always love you." (God even loves that fallen angel wherever she went!!)

Watchman tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are. Life, forgiveness, healing, hope, truth, light, peace. Shadows take flight. Doubt and terror are withdrawn. Friends, keep awake and watch what we see and hear.

The sign is not the health concern itself. It's the people who sit with us, and think of us, and pray for us, and all the medical attention we receive.

The sign is not the sexual abuse itself. It's the courage in women speaking up and a cultural shift in accepted expectations.

The sign is not the latest missile test in North Korea, or bomb in Somalia, or war in Yemen. It's not whatever concerns you may have for our city or country. It's in the way we work, we love our friends and family, we serve those in need and create opportunity for others, and we keep hope and witness in important ways every day to God's loving intentions for us and all creation.

Keep awake for the moment Christ comes is not a careful temporal calculation. It's a care-filled mental / emotional orientation. See the signs in little things every day. Receive them and become a sign of God's love for others, proclaiming God is near. These signs of Sacred Presence touch our hearts. They join us together with Sacred purpose of adorning our world with grace, life, beauty, as much as we decorate this sanctuary. They empower us to hear the song that came upon a midnight clear:

With the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled two thousand years of wrong ...
that glorious song of old.

Dear friends, hush the noise, cease the strife, and join that angels' song in our own moments of midnight. Prepare our hearts to be awake and aware with eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to welcome Jesus Christ when he comes. It might be December 25. It will surely be other moments before and after.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ See Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Beloved Thief" in *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), 4.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 4.