

The First Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 3, 2017

Mark 13: 24-37: Be Alert, Be Prepared, Be Not Afraid!

Preached

By

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

It is hard for us to understand Jesus' delay in His coming. God's time clock is certainly out of sync with ours as Little Jimmy learned as he was laying on a hill in the middle of a meadow on a warm spring day. Puffy white clouds rolled by and he pondered their shape. Soon, he began to think about God. So, he says, "God? Are you really there?" To his astonishment a voice came from the clouds. "Yes, Jimmy? What can I do for you?" Seizing the opportunity, Jimmy asked, "God? What is a million years like to you?" Knowing that Jimmy could not understand the concept of infinity, God responded in a manner to which Jimmy could relate. "A million years to me, Jimmy, is like a minute." "Oh," said Jimmy. "Well, then, what's a million dollars like to you?" "A million dollars to me, Jimmy, is like a penny." "Wow!" remarked

Jimmy, getting an idea. "You're so generous, God. Can I have one of your pennies?" God replied, "Sure thing, Jimmy! Just give me a minute."

My sisters and brothers, little Jimmy wasn't ready for that response was he? Our Gospel reading from Mark today seems an unlikely scripture for Advent. It has nothing to do with Mary and Joseph, the Wise Men, or the shepherds watching their flock. Instead it is a story about a wealthy landowner going on a trip. The servants left behind were given charge of the estate and when the master returned he would check on their stewardship. It is a story about being prepared, getting ready. In that sense then, this is an Advent story, for this is the season of preparedness and watchfulness and repentance.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, waiting is always difficult. Waiting for Santa is difficult for boys and girls and going through the busy Advent season is a lesson in patience for adults. There is so much to do. Someone has said you can tell a lot about a person by the way they handle three things: a rainy day, lost luggage at the airport, and tangled Christmas tree lights. Some of you know what I am talking about. The season of Advent, of course, has a twin focus. One focus is preparing to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. The other is preparing for that day when Christ will bring in his kingdom into all its' glory.

In our Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus is talking about the day when Christ will return to judge the earth. These are mysterious words and somewhat disturbing words, but let's begin here: *"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* Every once in a while someone will come along who claims to know when the day of the Lord is coming, the end of everything as we know it. Don't listen to him or her. No teaching of our Lord is clearer than this one: nobody knows when that day will be. Nobody knows what the future holds. Don't listen to any crackpot who tells you they have figured out the time and date when Christ will return. Beware of the fortune cookie that tells you that romance, prosperity and good health will soon be yours. There's no way to accurately predict what the future holds for any of us. To think otherwise is absolute foolishness.

The Sunday supplement magazine, *USA Weekend*, ran a story a few years ago titled "Fear: What Americans Are Afraid of Today."

In a scientific poll, the magazine uncovered the things Americans fear most:

-54% of us are either afraid or very afraid of being in a car crash.

-53% are afraid or very afraid of having cancer.

-50% are afraid or very afraid of inadequate Social Security.

-49% are afraid or very afraid of not having enough money for retirement.

-35% are afraid or very afraid of getting Alzheimer's.

Most of these are occurrences that no one can anticipate. Some of you have heard about home genetic testing devices that can tell you whether you are in danger of having diseases and conditions like Alzheimer's. Yet scientists are aware of people who have the genetic markers for Alzheimer's who never exhibit symptoms for this condition. Why worry yourself for nothing? None of us is guaranteed a worry-free passage through this world. The best we can do is to be prepared for whatever may come our way. Be alert! Be prepared! Be not afraid. You do not know when that time will come. Of course Jesus is speaking to his followers about his return. And he is telling them to be vigilant, be alert, and be prepared for his coming. And, of course, be not afraid.

I recently read that the unofficial creed of the Department of Homeland Security's war on terrorism is this: "Be vigilant, be watchful, and be prepared." "Be vigilant in matters of security," say those in charge of our security, "whether at an airport, a government institution or in the back sorting room of the post office. Be watchful for signs of terrorism: a backpack left unattended, a strange request for chemicals at a fertilizer plant, a

white powder in the mail or unusual behavior by a neighbor down the street. Be prepared to call the police or FBI. Be prepared to evacuate a building. Be prepared to take defensive measures when your life or the lives of others is threatened. Be vigilant, be watchful, and be prepared.”

That sounds somewhat like Jesus’ words to his followers, doesn’t it?

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back . . .” In terms of our personal lives, that is about all we can do to protect ourselves or those we love: keep watch and stay prepared.

Unfortunately, even the best preparation can prove inadequate. For example, some of the things that we fear have to do with our physical or psychological well-being. We fear cancer or we fear Alzheimer’s or a host of other ailments. And so we try to eat the right things and to exercise and to get a good night’s sleep, but none of these may matter. We still might contract the very disease we tried hardest to avoid. Or we worry about our finances and so we work hard and try to make smart financial choices, but few of us have the financial resources to cover all the bases. We still could get laid off from our job. The market still could have a protracted downturn that could wipe out our 401(k)s. We could be involved in a terrible accident that would keep us from working at all. “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry . . .” said

the poet Robert Burns, and he was right. There are very few sure things in life.

The only bullet-proof investment that you can make in this world is to put your trust in God. Only God will never forsake us. Only God will be there for us and give us the strength to endure. This is to say that after we have done all we can do to prepare ourselves externally, we need to prepare ourselves spiritually by spending time in God's presence. By spending time daily in God's presence and in living as God would have us live, we develop a trust relationship that makes it possible for us to endure even the most horrible and worst-case scenarios.

Christian sociologist Peter Berger in his book, *a Rumor of Angels*, uses an example of a child waking up in the night. She has been frightened by a bad dream. Her mom goes into her bedroom to comfort her and says, "It's all right." Berger asks us to consider what is happening in this situation. Is the parent lying when she comforts that child and says, "It's all right?" After all, in a world with cancer and concentration camps, it all looks very far from "all right" in any straight forward sense. Yet Berger claims that the reassurance the parent utters is not a lie, but a true insight that is vital for the child to receive as she or he grows into maturity. In other words, there is a profound

human conviction that ultimately all will be well, a belief that is a sign of the stirring of a deep hope within us.” In other words, we are confident that all will be well because God is in control. As long as God is in control, God’s children have nothing to fear. There may be dark hours. There may be surprises, both positive and negative, but we will never be forsaken. We are never alone. God is in control. Remember this, Jesus lived among us, there is no feeling, no experience that you can encounter that God does not understand. God went through the loneliness of Gethsemane. God experienced betrayal at the hands of Judas Iscariot. God experienced sorrow and weeping at the death of his dear friend Lazarus. God knew the feelings of temptation in the wilderness. God knew the joy of the wedding feast at Cana. God felt the pain of seeing his mother suffer while he was on the cross. So, please my sisters and brothers don’t let anyone tell you ever that God does not understand. I don’t care what you have encountered; God has been there first and has experienced it firsthand. In the suffering of children who are the victims of violence, God is there. No night is so dark that God’s light will not shine. No place is so barren, that new life cannot emerge. No person is so lost or weakened that they cannot be saved and exalted. Let’s not forget all the good times, in the warm and loving embrace of family and friends that God is there.

We are challenged on this first Sunday in Advent living in a world that exhibits all the signs of disaster on every front to be alert, be prepared and be not afraid. Only God knows when that day will come. Only God will bring about that day and not us. We think we have control. We control nothing. In that time, on that day of Christ's second coming, God goes before us and even though we may seem may to be lost and in the shadow of death we will not fear for you O God are ever with us and you will never leave us to face our perils alone. AMEN.