

SERMON  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent  
November 29, 2009

Jeremiah 33:14-16  
Psalm 25:1-10  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21:25-36

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

An elderly man sat on a park bench one afternoon late in the fall. The air was cold. He had been on his feet walking along the city streets, in and out of shops, for over two hours. His feet ached, his back ached, and his arms were tired. He just needed to sit down for a while and rest before heading home.

He was never prone to feeling sorry for himself, but this day he felt a sense of profound loneliness. The cold blustery winds and the thought of returning to his now empty house did not excite him. He stared at his large hands as he rubbed them back and forth between his knees trying to warm them up.

Suddenly a smaller hand, pink and chubby, was placed on top of his own. He jerked his head back and said “hello” in a bit of a raspy voice. Standing there next to him was a small child revealing the biggest smile you have ever seen.

The man stood up, took the child by the hand, and led him gently back to his mother who stood grinning just a few paces away.

“Thank you,” the mother said, “he has just learned to walk and has to race over and greet everyone he sees.”

The man smiled, nodded, then picked up his packages and started home. The aches were now gone. And so was the loneliness.

Memories of a chubby hand and a grinning face now warmed his heart. And just a few minutes before, he had had no idea of how close he was to this unexpected experience of joy.

Believe it or not, in the chaos of this world – in the loneliness of our hearts, there is joy. There is hope. And it can happen at any time. Many times, when we least expect it. There is hope because Jesus is coming. And that is what we remember during the season of Advent. For Advent is a time of joyous expectation.

“Be alert” Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading this morning. But what is Jesus talking about? Of course we are alert, especially at this time of year. After all, there are only 26 shopping days left until Christmas.

Being alert gives us the edge to make this the best Christmas ever. Being alert will allow us to hunt down and sneak into the only vacant parking space in the entire lot. Being alert will keep us from missing that last minute sale.

Being alert will help us to grab the last “Super Sally Sniffer Doll” off the shelf before the other frantic shoppers even realize that it is still there. Being alert will help us while standing in a long line to notice when a new cashier comes in and says “I can help you over here.”

Being alert helps us to not be caught off guard in the busyness and distractions of the holiday season. Being alert can help us to get all of our shopping done ahead of time, and still have some time left to take a breathe before the big day.

But wait! Into our planning, our shopping, our partying, interrupts the Word of the Lord: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory.”

To be honest with you, I thought for sure that this prophecy was coming true when I watched the news the day after Thanksgiving. I saw people lined up at stores for hours and sometimes days before they opened.

I watched as people almost trampled each other with a sense of panic when the doors opened. I saw evidence of fear and foreboding in their eyes. I thought to myself; “This is it, Jesus is coming again. Hopefully he won’t have to wait at the end of the line.”

As we begin a new church year, we hear again the promise that our Lord is indeed coming. In the midst of uncertain events going on in the heavens and on the earth, we hear the promise that the Son of God is on the way.

Jesus calls to us from the future and assures us, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the Kingdom of God is near.”

You see, even though we are told that the signs are all around us: the wars, the uncertain financial times, the natural disasters, the violence...

Even though we often feel that we have no control in our lives, no way to steer our ship out of the rocky shoal and into the safety of the harbor.

Jesus tells us that we can indeed stand firm and hold up our heads. Yes, there are signs around us, but they don't need to make us fearful, as they make some people fearful.

For the signs lead, not to the end, but to the beginning. The signs lead, not to destruction, but to life and wholeness. God's salvation is at hand! Stand firm in the Lord! Be ready at all times!

A flock of wild ducks were flying in formation, heading south for the Winter. They formed a beautiful "V" in the sky, and were admired by everyone who saw them from below.

One day, Wally, one of the wild ducks in the formation, spotted something on the ground that caught his eye. It was a barnyard with a flock of tame ducks that lived on the farm. They were waddling around on the ground, quacking merrily, and eating corn that was thrown on the ground for them every day.

Wally liked what he saw. "It sure would be nice to have some of that corn," he thought to himself. "And all of this flying is very tiring. I'd like to just waddle around for a while." So after thinking it over, Wally left the formation of wild ducks, made a sharp dive to the left, and headed for the barnyard.

He landed among the tame ducks, and began to waddle around and quack. He also started eating corn. The formation of wild ducks that he left continued their journey south, but Wally didn't care. "I'll rejoin them when they come back this way in a few months," he said to himself.

Several months went by and sure enough, Wally looked up and spotted the flock of wild ducks in formation, heading north. They looked beautiful and majestic up there in the clear blue sky. And Wally had grown tired of the barnyard.

It was always muddy, and everywhere he waddled there was nothing but duck doo-doo. “It’s time to leave,” Wally said. So Wally flapped his wings furiously and tried to get airborne. But he had gained some weight from all the corn he was eating, and he hadn’t exercised his wings much either.

He finally got off the ground, but he was flying too low and slammed into the side of the barn. He fell to the ground with a thud. He eventually struggled to his feet and said; “Oh well, I’ll just wait until they fly South again in a few months. Then I’ll rejoin them and become a wild duck again.”

But when the flock flew overhead once more, Wally again tried to lift himself out of the barnyard. But he simply didn’t have the strength. Every Winter and every Spring, he saw his wild duck friends flying over head, and they would call out to him. But his attempts to leave were all in vain.

Eventually Wally no longer paid any attention to the wild ducks flying overhead. He hardly even noticed them. He had, after all, become a barnyard duck.

You see, Wally had gotten so caught up in the barnyard way of life, that he was never ready when the wild ducks flew overhead.

That’s how it is with us. Sometimes we get so caught up in the busyness of life – in the so called “spirit of the season”, that we miss the times when Jesus comes to us and calls us to follow. Eventually, we lose touch with who we really are – children of God. We become barnyard ducks.

But Advent is a chance for us to look forward, to see the world, not for what it is, but for what it can be. Advent is a call for us to see the “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars – the distress among nations.” Advent calls us to stay alert. And instead of being afraid, we raise our heads and see the mighty works of God, because our redemption is drawing near.

And one of the ways we do this is through worship. Our liturgy is filled with images that speak of the promises foreshadowed in this morning's readings: "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy."

"Alleluia, Lord to Whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." "Let the vineyards be fruitful Lord, and fill to the brim our cup of blessing." "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest." "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Grant us peace."

You see, in the words and actions of our worship, we proclaim that God's victory reigns in our lives. The challenges and obstacles that threaten to shipwreck our lives have no power over us.

Likewise, as we gather around the Lord's Table for Holy Communion, we are looking forward. As we eat the bread and drink the wine, the body and blood of our Lord, we proclaim a day when we will eat at the feast of victory with Christ himself.

We receive the assurance that indeed we are loved and forgiven. And our Lord Jesus is guiding us through all our days – walking with us through the good times and supporting us in the difficult times.

And finally, as we go forth in service, we are looking forward. When we serve those in need, we can see Christ in others. We look forward when we seek to do good for others during this holiday season. We come to realize that being faithful is not simply finishing the Christmas shopping list.

For you see, so much of the joy that we feel in this season comes not from receiving, but from giving. And that doesn't necessarily mean giving little trinkets wrapped up in pretty boxes. Rather, it means giving of ourselves. It means making sacrifices for the sake of others.

So as we look forward to our Lord's coming as a babe in a manger in a few weeks, let us also be looking forward to our Lord's final coming – when all pain, death and suffering will be abolished once and for all. Therefore, as we begin this season of Advent, let us act to share that promise with those around us.

Seek out new holiday traditions that offer a ray of hope to those who may find it difficult to celebrate the season.

And as we do so, we again hear the words of St. Paul; “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”

This Advent season, it is my hope and prayer that each of us will prepare for our Lord's coming so that we can live in faith, hope, and joyful expectation – instead of fear and worry. For our future is in God's hands.

Indeed, Jesus invites us to open our lives up to God's unexpected, new and wonderful future. So, take heed. Let us raise our heads in the great hope and expectation of the coming of our Lord.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.  
Amen.