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Advent I

People Get Ready

Isaiah 64:1-2 & Mark 13:24-37

A couple of weeks ago, I received an e-mail. The subject line was "This will make your day much, much brighter." I thought, let's see if this is the case, so I opened the link in the email. It was a wonderful and uplifting slide show set to the song, "What A Wonderful World" as performed by Louis Armstrong. First recorded by him in August of 1967, it was not played that much in this country until it was featured in the film "Good Morning, Vietnam" some 20 years later.

I then Googled the song, so that I could look at the lyrics. The site I chose then had several pages of responses/thoughts on the lyrics and the replies of others. The lyrics have a "feel good" sense to them, like we want to have and experience in the Christmas season.

But in the life of the Church to get to Christmas, we have to go through the season of Advent. This is not easy to do as the commercial preparations for Christmas seem to begin earlier each year. The sense most of us have is to focus on the sentimental qualities of Christmas, and the performances, celebrations, get-togethers, and family traditions. There is no societal encouragement for us to make our Advent journeys, to observe that season of waiting, preparation and expectation for the coming of the Christ. But, as another pastor wrote,

Advent encourages us to examine our lives, to reflect on our need for God to enter our lives and to earnestly prepare for and eagerly await the coming of the Christ in the celebration of his birth, in Christ's continual coming in our daily living, and in the final coming of our Lord.

The Scripture readings for today remind us that Advent is about waiting, of the people of God waiting in exile, in persecution, in difficult, uncertain and overwhelming times, and in hope for God's promised coming.

It was interesting for me to note how these two viewpoints were illustrated in those website responses to the lyrics of "What A Wonderful World." Here is a sampling of several of these:

It's one of those songs you can hear even when you're down and just realize that aside from whatever you're going through there still is that other part of life that we can come back to...

However it's my favorite example of "ignorance is Bliss". It's a wonderful world while people all over the world die of starvation and diseases, while corrupt politicians steal money and make bad decisions, while the oil begins to run out and the economy goes down, while new wars start,...

Every time I hear this song I instantly see starving children, corrupt authority figures, and environmental demise. I also think about the billions of lonely, isolated individuals in the world – something far more chilling than any statistic.

It still is a beautiful, hope inspiring song, however – maybe it is just trying to show that there are still beautiful things in the world, aside from the devastation, and all you have to do is live day by day and search for the little things that make you happy.

The words from the prophet Isaiah remind us that the people had been in exile for their nation had been conquered, their capital city, Jerusalem destroyed, including the Temple – the center of their religious life. Dreams, hopes, plans for the future had all been lost with this destruction. Their future was gone and their past obliterated. The words express their sense of being abandoned by God, being made to suffer more than they can endure. God had acted in the past on their behalf. Why won't God again "tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence"?

Read on this Sunday, these words remind us that on our Advent journeys to the manger in Bethlehem we cannot ignore the shattered dreams and loss experienced by others, and our own suffering.

A minister from Scotland wrote:

Advent Sunday begins a time of preparation for the coming of Christmas. It is not a day to begin singing Christmas carols and switching on Christmas trees.

For the church it is a time to stop and be aware of the darkness, to hear the cries of a suffering world, to see where everything is going wrong in our lives, a time to change the liturgical color to purple, and time to be penitent and to pray fervently: "O Come, Lord, come." It is also a time to look to the coming of Christ at Christmas and to look for the Second Coming.

This minister continues:

Snowmen and Santas appeared in my newspaper shop mid September, and Christmas catalogues were in the mail in July. We know that there are pains about, but we keep busy and try to be happy, try to avoid reality which is too difficult for us to handle.

Suddenly the banking system failed, the housing market collapsed, our savings vanished, our debts are too high and our jobs may go. There were price rises for utilities and food. We heard the reports from London, New York, Frankfurt and Tokyo.

We never hear much about the cries of those suffering in developing countries – for our own shrieks were too loud. In addition this year we had hip operations, heart surgery, bad backs and needed new glasses.

In Africa, they continue to need food, clean water, peace, stable government. Thinking about all these things and feeling overwhelmed and helpless, in the end we turn to God and ask passionately: why do you not come down and do something?

And if all of this isn't enough to bring us down, we read of more in the passage from Mark. In it we encounter suffering and the physical end of the world, of heaven and earth passing away, and the Son of Man coming, that is the Second Coming of Jesus. We don't want to deal with these, thank you just the same.

We sang "O come, O come, Emmanuel" as our first hymn. Looking at its words may be able to help us to focus on Advent waiting. A writer at the 'Center for Church Music' wrote:

The season of Advent is often a whirl of buying gifts, decorating the tree, and a non-stop succession of programs and parties. It was, however, not that way for the Monks of the Middle Ages.

In the monastery, Advent was a time of meditation on serious subjects: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. And the month in which we think of Christ's first coming was used by monks to reflect on His second coming.

In the same way, this should be true for Christians today. We glance backward to Bethlehem, but we look forward to eternity with God.

As we sang the hymn, we sang of mourning, loneliness, gloom, darkness, shadow, misery, envy, strife, and discord – and we know that these are part of our lives and the lives of others across this world. But the words also express the longing of 'captive Israel' for God's promised Son, of his coming to make things right in this world. We sang of the appearing of the Son of God.

A Brother Maynard wrote of this hymn:

The verses are calls to the Messiah to come, calling him by the various names he is given. For this reason, it makes a fitting opener for the season of Advent, when we call to our Messiah to come. The theme for the first week of Advent is Hope, and this song is filled with it,....

In this in-between time of waiting to celebrate again the birth of Jesus and waiting for his coming that second time, the words we read from the Gospel call us to 'get ready', for we are to be about the work assigned to us by our Master in his absence. The text reminds us that we cannot put things off, slough off, for we do not know when He will return and he will expect to find us fulfilling our responsibilities. What might these be? Basically caring for family, friends, and strangers, doing as described in the Gospel reading for last week, Matthew 25:31-40: feeding the hungry, providing drink for the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, taking care of the sick, and visiting those in prison.

You are already doing these deeds of the kingdom. But we also experience uncertainty, doubt, and despair as a part of our lives. It is possible to be drawn out of these by that hope of Advent. I was reminded of this in the November 26 devotion in the *These Days* magazine:

Dottie was a dancer. All of her life her ambition had been to become a professional dancer. She had had many opportunities to dance on stage.

Then one night Dottie was in a car accident and lost the use of both of her legs. Her career as a dancer was over.

Dottie prayed for a miracle. She prayed fervently that her legs would be restored.

That didn't happen, but another miracle happened just the same that touched many people. Dottie bought a car that she was able to drive and began visiting soldiers in the veterans' hospital.

There she demonstrated to the soldiers, many of whom could not walk, that their lives could go on. Dottie's joy and enthusiasm for living gave soldiers a new vision of what they could become. Through her disability, she became an inspiration and gave hope to many others.

The challenges and uncertainties of life, things happening in our homes, schools, personal lives, workplace and/or community, or half way around the globe can so affect our lives. Fires, floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, storms, terrorist attacks, criminal activity, companies going under, job loss,

health issues, and more can be just around the corner or have been experienced. In the midst of any and all of these, Christ's words still come to us this first Sunday of Advent– Be alert, get ready.

The November 22 entry in the Presbyterian Church's Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study is as follows:

Daher Nassar was a Palestinian Christian who lived all his life on his 100 acres of land 9 kilometers southwest of Bethlehem. Daher purchased the land in 1916,... In 1991 the Israeli government declared the area state property.

Since then, the Nassar family has challenged Israel's declaration and repeatedly brought the case to court.

The Nassars have started a program called 'The Tent of Nations.' Its objective is to prepare young people to contribute to their future and their culture by learning understanding and tolerance through life experience. This is accomplished at the Vineyard through tree planting, work and study camps, vocational training, and the reconciliation program.

Groups of local or international youth come for a few days or weeks to participate.

Mission volunteer Shannon O'Donnell went to the Nassars' land, called Daher's Vineyard, to help plant trees. She writes, "It may seem like a small thing to bring city youth to work in a vineyard, but connecting people to the land reaps great rewards. There is so much stress and conflict over land that it's easy to lose track of what people are fighting for.

Teaching people to respect the land is not difficult, but giving them land to tend is harder to do when it may be taken away.

The Nassars' land is surrounded by illegal Israeli settlements. We planted trees precisely because a few years ago settlers had cut down the olive trees.

I had no idea it takes an olive tree at least 10 years to produce olives. The land is very rocky and hard to plow or dig. But there's nothing like the satisfaction of planting a tree.

What an act of hope it was for the Nassar family to start The Tent of Nations program in the midst of the ongoing uncertainty of their lives. And what an act of hope it is – to plant a tree that, if all goes well, will not even produce fruit for 10 years. Dottie's, Shannon's, and the Nassar's family deeds are works of love, righteousness, justice, and peace. They are part of the work of God's Kingdom that has been given to all of Christ's people to do.

This season of Advent is for us a time of daylight getting shorter and nighttime getting longer. Even so, we gather, as do Christ's people all over the world, in the darkest and most dangerous of times to light candles with hope and expectancy.

As we light the candles and begin our Advent journeys, we remember what God has done, we look forward to what God will do, and we look around at what God is doing now. As a people getting ready, we do the work of our Master in earnest, with diligence and devotion, daily participating in the work of God's kingdom, just as the Nassars, Dottie and Shannon did. We should not procrastinate, for the day or hour is unknown and will arrive unexpectedly. We should not act like we have something to wait for before we get to work the way God wants us to. The time is now for us to live lives that express our gratitude for God's promise being fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus, God's gift of hope and his promised second coming. Amen.