

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Christ Will Come Again”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2011

Isaiah 64:1–9; Psalm 80:1–7, 14–19; Mark 13:24–37

“It takes a long time to learn church,” Lauren Winner laments
in *Girl Meets God*, her memoir of a spiritual journey that bridges
Judaism and Christianity.

“There are still many people's names I don't know,
although I... nod and bustle and chat when I walk into services,” she says, and...

“I don't yet know the rhythms of this church,” she confesses.

(Lauren Winner. *Girl Meets God*, p. 36)

Yes, it does take a long time to learn “church,”
even for those of us for whom “church” is our profession.

Living by the liturgical calendar can be mystifying.

I am still confused sometimes as to whether Christ the King Sunday
is a Sunday when we wear green or white vestments,
or whether Reformation Sunday is a red or green day,
or whether Passion/Palm Sunday is purple or red.

Having grown up in a church that did not honor such rhythms and color schemes,

I can still be caught off-guard by a change in liturgical focus.

Like today – the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year

in the life cycle of the church; a purple season, like Lent;

a season of waiting and preparation for one of God's razzle-dazzle events, like Lent;

a season of fasting before the feasting, like Lent.

Advent is a season when we begin with the literature of apocalypse, the scary stuff,
the kind of stuff that can give "church" a bad reputation

because it has so often been used as a means of controlling believers,
instilling fear and dread by portraying a frightening God.

So, to allay those initial fears, let's remind ourselves before we begin

that *apocalypse* comes from the Greek word for *uncovering* or *revealing*,
which makes it a word about possibilities.

And while uncovering something we'd just as soon keep hidden is a frightening prospect,
the point of apocalypse is not to frighten us into submission,
but rather to teach us think about things in a way that suggests new possibilities
and in a way that sanctifies our living here and now.

(Kathleen Norris. *Amazing Grace*, p. 318-319)

W.H. Auden, the poet, near the end of his life

participated in worship by attending Russian Orthodox services
near his home in the East Village of New York.

"Thank God," Auden told a friend, "though I know what is going on,
I don't understand a single word."

What he meant to express was his belief that listening without understanding
might be the truest way of approaching the divine,

of paying attention, of listening, to something other than oneself.

(Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*, "Heart to Heart", Nov. 14, 2011, p. 86)

Advent begins with the practice of listening without understanding

to things just beyond our knowing – these apocalyptic texts,

of seeing without focusing on things just beyond the horizon,

for those who are brave enough to put fear aside for a season,

and to entertain new possibilities about God and neighbor.

**Listen now, without understanding, God's word to us
as we read Mark 13: 24-37.**

We begin Advent with a new Gospel, Mark, not at the beginning of Mark
as we might expect, but near the end, just before Mark's passion narrative,
where Jesus speaks eschatologically of ultimate and final things and the signs of his return.
Jesus adopts the language of the Old Testament prophets
when he speaks of the sun, moon, and stars being out of sync,
of the heavenly bodies being shaken.

He reflects the impassioned cry of the prophet Isaiah as he calls out,
"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you." (Isaiah 64:1)

Isaiah goes on to remember the awesome deeds God
performed in the past which we did not expect
and prays for God to be manifested again in such earth-shaking ways.

So, if we can put fear aside for a season and avoid the temptation to link Mark's narrative
with our own local newsflashes of asteroids about to crash into the earth or
of space junk falling from the sky,
we just might imagine alternative applications of the text
other than a call to duck and run for cover.

My sense is that Jesus is advocating for believers to act as if
chronos time-marking methods no longer rule our lives together,
as if the sun no longer determines day, night, and season,
as if the moon no longer determines tides and months,
as if the stars no longer determine the zodiac and astrological time.

In other words, I think Jesus is saying, pay attention to the things of God,
to qualitative things, not those quantitative things,
and notice the thin places in our life together,
where heaven and earth just might be about to kiss and fuse,
where God's reign might be almost visible.

The receptionist at the downtown YMCA, one of my favorite on-the-street theologians,
was determined the other morning
to feed my Y-card through the scanner for the umpteenth time,

certain that she would get it to read the bar code
even though my Y-card is permanently bent
after having run it through the washer and dryer one too many times.

When the scanner ran it through on about the twentieth swipe,
she exclaimed gleefully,

“See, sometimes I just have to have a sign that God is still there!”

Isn't that the truth? Isn't that what we live for, those small signs of God-presence,
of kingdom-proximity, of Jesus-imminence to counter our helplessness
before fear and death?

That's what Jesus advocates in his cosmic commentary, an awareness of *kairos* time,
of God time beyond our *chronos* time,
of God-moments beyond our wrist-watches, blackberries and calendars,
of glimpses just beyond the veil of temporality,
of thin places where heaven and earth are close to touching,
of signs that the reign of God is indeed very near.

The Psalmist speaks of these *kairos* moments in Psalm 85 this way:

“Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Faithfulness springs forth from the earth
and righteousness looks down from heaven.” (Psalm 85:10-11)

Chronos' endless ticking makes us feel old, tired, stiff and gray-headed,
cynical and doubtful that anything out of the ordinary is even probable anymore;
that we're impossibly distant from God,
and that Jesus will never return to make things right.

Kairos' in-breaking interruptions make us feel renewed, alert, vigilant,
aware of something magnificent beyond our knowing, beyond our understanding;
titillated with the possibility that God is, indeed, very near.

Several weeks ago, when our church hosted the Covenant Network Conference,
a joyful gathering of those who believe that ordination
is a calling and privilege of membership for ALL of God's chosen people,

I had the privilege of reuniting with an old high school classmate,
whom I haven't seen for quite some time.

This cherished friend happened to have had the misfortune of witnessing the
Virginia Tech massacre that took place in Blacksburg on April 16, 2007,
in which a lone shooter took the lives of 33 victims, including his own life,
and physically wounded 25 more.

My friend was not physically wounded, but she was deeply emotionally scarred by the event,
as were many who knew the victims, or who also witnessed the killer's rampage.

Following worship on that Friday night, she approached me, eyes welling with tears,
saying that she had a vision during the prayers of the people
with the disclaimer that she is not someone who normally sees such things.

We found a quiet spot where she could tell me what she had experienced
and why it was causing such an emotional upheaval within her.

She explained through her tears that during the prayer,
she experienced a vision of the Virginia Tech shooter, Seung-Hui Cho,
seated at the Table of the Lord, surrounded by those whom he had killed,
and that as he sat in their midst, he began to glow with a golden light,
as if he were being transformed, transfigured, changed, healed
at Table in the presence of those who should have been his enemies.

"He is being transformed. I think he is being healed," my friend said.

"I think the killer is being healed,
and that I have had a brief glimpse of the reign of God,
which is healing to me, too."

Great is the mystery of faith. Christ has died. Christ is risen. *Christ will come again.*

In *kairos* time, in qualitative, not quantitative time, as Jesus is trying to tell us,
the reign of God is nearing. Healing, the kiss of heaven and earth,
is on our doorstep.

When I hear Jesus say that the Son of Man will come again in clouds with great power
and glory, surprisingly, I don't hear overtones of judgment,
as in other Gospel accounts of the second coming.

Rather, I hear one of those great Gospel reversals unfolding,
with Jesus dispatching his vast heavenly army
to search high and low to the far corners of heaven and earth
and collect those formerly scattered, all of the faithful, the living and the dead,
and restore us as his beloved community.

The Greek word that Mark uses for gathering, *epi-sunago*, means to assemble the chosen
and is the root word from which the English noun *synagogue* comes.

The only other time that Mark uses this verb is early in the Jesus narrative,
when the whole town of Capernaum, the whole town, (Mark 1:33)

gathers at the door of Simon and Andrew's home after Jesus has healed their mother;
in order for Jesus to likewise heal their sick, the whole town, *gathers*.

Do we get a hint from this first gathering, of what this final gathering will be about?

Does Mark mean to imply a vast cosmic healing of a whole people and towns
just beyond the horizon when Jesus returns with great power and glory?

I think that is what this vision of Jesus suggests,

and I think that is what my friend's vision also entertains.

Our marriages, our families, our Main Streets and Wall Streets, our universities,

our health care systems, our religious culture, our sporting culture,

our legal system, our national and world politic,

all the places where we are broken, where our fault-lines are showing,

where our best-laid plans fall apart, where our myths of goodness and safety

are shaken to the core, will be gathered in and exposed for what they are

with the possibility for new life that is wholesome and well,

infused with integrity and with God's *shalom*.

And when I hear Jesus encourage believers to take a lesson from the fig tree,

I don't hear withering threats or cutting comments

about those who have not produced fruit

in his absence (Matt 21: 18-19, Luke 13: 6-9).

Rather, I hear another great Gospel reversal about things formerly down,

like tree sap in winter,

rising up in the branches, causing green leaves suddenly to sprout.
And I hear the possibility of other things formerly down,
like the down-trodden, the oppressed, the depressed, the widows, the orphans,
the poor, the critically ill, the grieving, the dead and buried,
rising up to new life, restored, like summer leaves on a winter tree.
In Palestine, where most greenery is of the evergreen variety,
one would see fig leaves as a sign that the darkness of winter is past
and that the lighter days of summer are near.
Even if your sundial were broken, you would notice the leafing of the deciduous trees
as a sign of seasonal change and an indicator of more light coming
into your corner of the world.

My husband and I had the privilege in September of visiting the new 9/11 Memorial
at the site of the former World Trade Center in New York City
just days after it opened on the 10th anniversary of 9/11.
Two perfectly symmetrical footprints mark the spots where the Twin Towers once stood,
and silent walls of water cascade into the cavities where the
buildings once rose, symbolic of the trail of tears
shed for the nearly 3,000 innocent victims who lost their lives
that beautiful day.

Visiting the 9/11 Memorial was a *kairos* moment for me, I have to tell you.
The first thing I noticed was the orderliness of the place.
The building footprints are huge perfect squares, with the names of all the victims inscribed
around the perimeter in alphabetical order in perfectly uniform type-face—
a perfect democracy of innocence and death.
The trees in the park surrounding the memorial are in symmetrical rows,
each tree exactly the same height as the other.
And the silence of the setting is stunning, even when filled with people,
with family and friends bending over the smooth stone perimeter
to trace the names of their loved ones on scrolls of paper,
or to rub over each letter reverently with their fingertips.

The second thing I noticed was the number of victims who were named Jesus,
or de Jesus or a Jesus derivative.

Eight of them, I learned, had Jesus in their names.

Was Jesus there when the planes careened into walls and fields,
when the towers came tumbling down,
when the flow of fleeing people clotted in the building stairwells?

It reminded me of Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel's famous comment
when he witnessed another act of terror, the hanging of a young boy, a child,
in the midst of a German concentration camp, as an on-looker and lamented aloud,
"Where is merciful God, where is He...
for God's sake, where is God?"

And Wiesel claims that from within him, he heard a voice answer,

"Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows."

(Elie Wiesel. *Night*, p. 64-65)

I also notice the number of unborn children who were among those lost,
indicated beside the names of each known pregnant female victim.

The etching for these double victims would read:

Monica Rodriguez Smith and her unborn child, for example;
Ten of them were identified and so designated,
which I thought was lovely, yet doubly sad.

These hopeful words of Jesus about his promised return in Mark
do not elicit fear in me at all,
but they, obviously, **do** speak to a deep, painful place within me
and unleash thoughts of massacres, terrorism, holocaust, and loss of life,
making me realize that life NOW is what is fearful to me,
which is exactly what these apocalyptic texts address—
the fear that is already with and among us.

These are the places and the types of situations where hope is most needed,
where second-coming redemption and healing is most longed for,
where in-gathering and restoration of community is most precious,

where our deepest yearning for God's great mystery of faith is most earnest.
Apocalyptic literature is rooted in hurt and always addresses a threatened people.
Whether it is people in exile, or people living apart from their full potential;
whether it is people experiencing persecution, or people living with daily suffering;
whether it is one particular God-person on the way to Calvary,
apocalyptic texts uncover or reveal God's dream for healing our brokenness,
for a final fusing of heaven and earth,
and for the personal presence of Jesus, beyond what we only now experience
in bread and cup, by Spirit, through prayer,
or in the face-to-face service to the least of these.

In my *kairos* moment at Ground Zero, I wanted to think that Jesus was there,
making new order out of the chaos of that fateful day,
and that Christ will come again to rightly order all of our lives and our world.
I wanted to think that Jesus was there, not just eight times, as I counted,
but 3,000 times, with and for each person who cried out to God that day,
and that Christ will come again to bring great healing to all the places
where pain prevails, where hurt lingers,
where things downed in darkness long to rise up and sprout to new life.
And I wanted to think that God-with-us, born into our world as light and life,
was there for each unborn child who perished before seeing the light and life
of even their first day,
and that Christ will come again to gather in the living and the dead
and find a place for everyone in loving, rightful God-families.

Great is the mystery of faith. Christ has died. Christ is risen. *Christ will come again.*
Because we have experienced some of this to be true,
we have wed ourselves to the air, to the clouds, to the thin places,
to the possibility that all of it will be true
because our hearts may be broken by suffering, but our spirits are not broken;
with faces turned upward towards the firmament,

we long for these unimaginable, impossible things
without understanding how they will come to pass,
nevertheless, praying into the mystery:

“Come, Lord Jesus, come.” Amen.