

**Dunns Corner Community Church, Presbyterian**  
**Sunday, November 29, 2020**  
**Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37**  
**“Daring to Hope”**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, Preaching**

Today, on this first Sunday in Advent, our theme is hope. So, I begin with this story. There were once two identical twins. They were alike in every way but one. One was a hope-filled optimist who only ever saw the bright side of life. The other was a dark pessimist, who only ever saw the downside in every situation. The parents were so worried about the extremes of optimism and pessimism in their boys, that they took them to the Doctor. He suggested a plan. “On their next birthday give the pessimist a shiny new bike but give the optimist only a pile of manure.”

It seemed a fairly extreme thing to do. After all the parents had always treated their boys equally. But in this instance, they decided to try to Doctor’s advice. So, when the twins birthday came round, they gave the pessimist the most expensive, top of the line, racing bike, a child has ever owned. When he saw the bike his first words were, “I’ll probably crash and break my leg.” To the optimist they gave a carefully wrapped box of manure. He opened it, looked puzzled for a moment, then ran outside screaming, “You can’t fool me! Where there’s this much manure, there’s just gotta be a pony around here somewhere!” That’s real hope!

Well, Happy New Year! Sounds a bit strange on November 29th to say Happy New Year, doesn't it?! And quite frankly I think we all wish this was a new year, we are definitely tired of this one. But today is the beginning of a new liturgical year in the church. So Happy New Year! But the readings for this first Sunday in Advent, this first Sunday in the church year, this Sunday of Hope, seem anything but hopeful, nothing like a celebration as we know New Year's celebrations to be. They pronounce the end of time. The end of time with a capital E. And yet the prophetic visions and rich imagery of these passages you just heard, does give us an amazing picture of hope. Let me explain.

When we look at the passage from the Gospel of Mark, we quickly realize this is not a passage about preparing for Christmas and the birth of the Christ child in a manger. In this passage, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, about his Second coming and the new world to come. When the Son of God will come again in full control and the angels, God's messengers, will gather the believers of the world. We don't know when this is going to happen, so we better keep awake.

When I was in the 9th grade a close friend of mine invited me to her church's youth fellowship meeting. That evening we saw a movie called "A Thief in the Night." It was based on those books – "Left Behind". The movie was about the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. It showed some being chosen and taken to a new place - scary angel-like creatures like a thief in the night, silently taking those written in

the "Book of Life", the "true" believers of Jesus Christ. And the many, many left behind. And the fires and earthquakes and floods which destroy the entire world, and death, so much death. By the end of the movie all of us were either crying with great sadness or shaking with great fear or both. I was so scared I had nightmares for days.

My friend was so upset because she knew her brother would not be chosen because he no longer attended her church. The point of the movie was to scare us into living like "good" Christians every day, and to sadden us into working as hard as we could to "save" as many others as we could. It took me years to unpack all I saw that night. Is that what the second coming is about? Fear and sadness? Then, I don't understand.

Now, whenever the disciples didn't quite understand something, what would Jesus do? He would always tell a parable. The master goes on a journey and leaves his servants in charge. Well folks, the master Jesus Christ, has left us in charge and be on watch. So, how are we doing? How is his house? Is everything in order? Is everything that he began still continuing today? What would happen if he came back to check up on us? Would he be pleased?

It's like a common scene from our school days. The teacher states, "Now class, I am going down the hall to the principal's office for a few minutes. I certainly hope that I can trust you to act like responsible fifth graders. But just in case, I'm leaving the door open. I have asked Mrs. Moffat, across the hall, to

listen for trouble. I hope that you will show me how responsible you are. I'm leaving now. You have work to do while I am gone." As one pastor writes, "It is an irresponsible class that can be trusted only when the teacher is present. It is a worthless servant who can be trusted only when the master is in town." (1)

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . . to make your name known," states the Prophet Isaiah. When the master is with us, we are at our best, strong and mighty. But when the master goes away, Isaiah states, "There is no one who calls on your name, for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity." In other words, because you're not here God - we sin! We don't know what we're doing!

The slaves in Mark's parable wait for one they have met and known, their master. Now, what sort of master would leave town and place all that he has in the hands of his servants? Jesus would and has. What sort of servants would be worthy of such trust? The disciples, all of us. Are they awake enough to notice Jesus is still present, helping, guiding, loving, returning to us every Advent? Do we see it? Are we awake?

I'm currently reading a book by Sue Monk Kidd (you know the author of "the Secret Life of Bees") entitled, When the Heart Waits. I highly recommend it. She writes about how God enters into our times of waiting, making a home with us, sharing the experience and moving to transform us. And this

book was written 20 years ago. She describes the threefold cycle of waiting: first is separation – wow, we’ve done that, second is transformation, and then third is emergence. Like the caterpillar, the cocoon, and then the butterfly. I am sure most of feel like we are in that cocoon, but are we awake? Watching?

There once was a little boy who found a cocoon. Inside he knew was a beautiful butterfly trying to emerge, so he decided to make the butterfly’s life easier. As the butterfly began to move inside the cocoon, the boy carefully enlarged the hole through which the butterfly would emerge. He was hoping to make the butterfly’s entrance into the world an easier one, to make his beautiful appearance without struggle. Here is the problem, butterflies develop and gain strength in their wings by pushing against the sides of the cocoon. With no need for that, the butterfly emerged not able to fly.

Right now, we are waiting, definitely in a cocoon, but we need to realize we are not sleeping, we are struggling and being transformed. What does Paul tell us, “suffering produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” (Romans 5:3-5) Struggle just might be God’s way of teaching us how to fly. What if you were to think of how God is using this cocoon we are in, this waiting, to change us. Our hope, Sue Monk Kidd states, our “hope lies in braving the chaos and waiting calmly, with trust in the God who loves us. For if we wait, we may find with color, startling encounters with the soul.” (2) We are being transformed, right now. As

the potter molds the clay, God is molding and shaping and moving our lives, right now.

So, how are we doing, waiting? If Christ came back today, would he be pleased? Would he find his house in order, things being tended to, things as he left them? Would we pass the test? Well, maybe the test is not of what we are doing, how “good” we are, but how we are found waiting, anticipating, changing. We are to be waiting and watching in a way that shows we know that this is the master’s house. To be using our gifts to their greatest capacity in the name of Christ. Not to be scared half out of our minds for the coming of Christ, running around trying to save the world, but like this season of Advent, to be found waiting with great anticipation for all that is to come. With open arms, with open hearts, to watch how God is using this time and us.

But let’s face it, we are an impatient people, a distracted people. We hate waiting, especially in this world, for a vaccine, for a cure, for all this to end! And we are very bad at waiting. If we are in that dreaded line at the DMV, sitting in a doctor’s office waiting room, in line at the grocery store, how often do we take the time to notice our surroundings, who is standing six feet from us, what is happening around us. Being awake, aware. Why would we? We’re all in masks and can’t see half of each other’s faces! And we have cell phones to text on or play games on or check our all-important email. When I travel, when I used to, I just can’t figure out why so many people have to be constantly talking on their cell phones in public. We don’t

know how to wait; we don't see a need to notice what is happening around us.

The anticipation of Christ coming again into our hearts is not about our mistakes, our deficient faith, our spiritually empty lives. It is about waiting, noticing, keeping alert. What do you see changing right now? What do you see happening in our families, in our work, in our children's education, in our socializing, in our environment, in our resources, in our way of teaching, of learning, of giving, of being church? God is at work transforming us, do you see it?

One of my favorite sermons was titled, "Something is about to happen," by Tom Long. He states, those in the early church always believed that "something was about to happen." So, every word they uttered, every deed they did, every prayer they prayed was shaped by this coming event. It is like expectant parents who actually enjoy assembling that crib, painting the nursery, practicing the pushing and breathing. Because something is about to happen. Christmas itself has this kind of power. People brave crowds at the mall and edgy clerks (maybe not this year); gifts are carefully chosen, packages wrapped, and ceramic nativity scenes dusted and set, piece by piece, on the mantle. (Think of the decorating we have time for this year!) Every act has meaning, because something is about to happen. (3)

But we also know the sense of loss and disappointment when nothing really happens. Each year we sing the same

songs, tell the same stories, does something really happen? This year, many of us won't be with family, won't see loved ones at all. Do we really need to prepare and watch for the coming of Christ? Dr. Long states, "if there is no God-shaped future at hand, if nothing, nothing really, is about to happen, then there is only one more day to be endured in an endless string of days, a bottomless pit of human need, and a ceaseless line of the poor, who are always with us. All there is left for the church to be is another well-meaning institution, and all there is left for the church to do is to whistle its liturgy in the dark, collect the pledge cards and keep the copy machine humming. Because nothing is about to happen." (4)

But I say, watch out, because something is happening. Advent is a season of preparation and waiting. And this year, guess what?! It won't be filled with all those activities, concerts, mall shopping, parties, endless activities. We have actually been given a gift this year where we can thoughtfully spend some time thinking about the beginning of time and the birth of the Christ child, about the middle time we are in now and being God's servants and angels, the cocoon we are in, and about the future of time when Christ comes again and again into our hearts, and we will be transformed.

All we need to do is be ready to receive the joy given to us, the comfort bestowed upon us, the good news we hear, the love we feel, and rejoice. Be open and awake to the transformation that is taking place. Because we will trip and fall and sob and faint in this life, but we can't miss good news,



the hope which surrounds us – my friends we may have a vaccine in 2021!

According to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, there are the three abiding virtues in life, they are: “Faith, hope and love”. Faith compels us to look up and have confidence in the true living God who sustains us. Love compels us to look around and have compassion to help those in need. And hope, hope motivates us to look ahead with the assurance of knowing that the future is our friend, for Christ comes again and again into our hearts. The end, the end with a Capital E may be far off in the future but with the Christ Child in our hearts, we can have hope that one day nations, cities, churches, families, will learn war no more. Because of hope farmers plant seeds, because of hope teachers teach pupils, because of hope people fall in love and get married and have families, because of hope we light candles and look for light. Because we dare to hope, we dare to envision peace on earth, because we dare to hope, we will be saved through God’s amazing incomprehensible generous eternal love. Because we dare to hope, we will be transformed. So, Keep Awake! Amen.

- (1) Willimon, The Rev. William. Advent/Christmas: Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year, p. 13.
- (2) Monk Kidd, Sue. When the Heart Waits, p. 92.
- (3) Long, The Rev. Thomas. Shepherds and Bathrobes: Sermons for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, p. 10.
- (4) Ibid., p. 11.