

First Sunday of Advent: “Expect Hope”
Isaiah 64:1-9 Mark 13:24-37

In the rhythm of the liturgical year today is the first Sunday of the year, and it is the first Sunday of the season of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation and waiting, a particular kind of preparation and a particular kind of waiting.

It might be helpful to take the time to ask ourselves for what are we preparing and for what are we waiting? The theme that we have chosen for this year is “**Expect**” and in that single word is the potency that can give focus to this season. When we “expect” in our preparations, and when we “expect” in our waiting we have a posture that is not just resigned to one more season and one more year, but our preparation and our waiting are all with an attitude of expectant hope.

In the church office every year we are deluged with a steady stream of all kinds of church catalogues. This year I spent some time going through them to choose a series of special bulletins to highlight this season of Advent. I chose this series of bulletins because they were not only beautiful but also had substance that is faithful to the themes of Advent that are expressed in scripture.

Notice the symbol of Hope that is pictured on today’s bulletin. The first thing you notice is a stump which seems to be an odd symbol for hope. The symbol of the stump comes from the passage in Isaiah 11 which begins “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” This is not just a passing hope that is being pictured here. It is a hope that is courageously resilient because it grows out of spiritual resources that are deeply rooted and have access to ultimate sources tapped into the abundant and steadfast love of God.

There is an interesting question in the insert. It asks us to recall a time when you felt like a stump. Can you recall a time when you felt like a stump? When you had been cut off from someone and experienced great loss? It might be a time when you had been deprived of resources either material or emotional support? Did you have the capacity to hope during that time?

I find the reflection on hope in the insert very helpful.¹ “Hope is a natural instinct. From the moment they are born, babies cry in the hope that someone will attend to their needs. They instinctively turn their heads toward the source of nourishment, and as their eyes begin to focus they count on the visual cues they receive from their caregivers to bolster their sense of well-being. Even though many children grow up in less-than-ideal situations, it takes a great deal to cancel out their natural ability to hope.”

¹ Hope from Logos Productions.

Keeping hope alive is a critical part of the spiritual life for each of us. Just as a stump may seem to be an unlikely symbol for hope so also at first hearing the gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Advent may also seem like an unlikely place to turn to nurture our sense of hope.

The gospel is an apocalypse that comes toward the end of Mark. It begins by describing “those days and that suffering” where things seem to be collapsing around them. Neither the sun nor the moon are shining, the stars are falling from the sky, and the powers that hold the world together are rattled. All the outward sources that are relied upon to maintain orderliness are taken away, but rather than the time of ultimate disaster Jesus insists that this is the time of the coming of the Son of Man, the One who will reveal to us what it truly means to be human.

Jesus says that the Son of Man will send out his angels to “gather his elect from the four winds.” I want to think with you about just who are “the elect.” According to the dictionary “the elect” are an exclusive group of people who have been carefully chosen.

Currently we are in a time in our country of political transition, and I have been seeing a sign that I don’t recall seeing previously in similar circumstances. When Barack Obama makes his various announcements or statements he has been appearing at a podium with the sign on it that says “Office of the President Elect.”

Now we know what that means. It means that he has won the election and by both the popular vote and the electoral vote, and that on January 20 he will take the oath of office and become the next President of the United States. Right now, to say that he is President Elect means that even though he does not have the authority of the Office he has the vote.

But when Jesus talks about the coming of the Son of Man he is not referring to a political election, he is talking about a spiritual identity. When Jesus talks about gathering the elect from the four winds he is not talking about any perception of winning a popular vote he is speaking of your spiritual identity.

This is Jesus way of telling you that you may feel like your world is in danger of collapse, you may feel like your hopes have been severed from you leaving you as nothing more than a stump, but in God’s reality you have won the election. You have received God’s vote, personally and specifically intended for you.

That is the gospel for the first Sunday of the church year and the first Sunday of Advent. **YOU HAVE WON THE ELECTION!** That is Paul’s affirmation when he says that “hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.” In the first chapter of first Corinthians Paul declares “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift.” This election is not even close. It does not require a recount. It is unanimous. You have God’s vote. But, and there is a “but”, just as in the sign “Office of the President Elect” there is also a clear meaning of “not yet

in office” or “not yet in full authority” that is also the meaning of waiting and preparation in Advent as well.

The gospel that Jesus came to proclaim is that being made in the image of God means that God has already voted for us, we can already be secure in that but, and the but is significant, we have not yet fully surrendered to his authority in our lives. That is a significant difference. The kingdom of God is not yet fully realized in our midst so we are in a time of preparation and waiting.

Jesus gives us two cautions right along with the election results. First of all, he says, “learn the lesson of the fig tree; as soon as its branch becomes tender ... we know that summer is near”. In the same way, when things get really tough in your life, don’t give up, don’t give in, don’t give out because this is the way my personal closeness is revealed, in the thin times of your life. Jesus is saying, it is in the thin times that you can most rely upon my word in your life.

Let me ask you, whose word do you rely on? A few years ago there was a television commercial for an investment firm whose rememberable line was “When ----- speaks, everyone listens.” Who do you listen to?

I heard a story about a Pastor who was enjoying, or trying to enjoy an afternoon boat trip with a group of friends. There was a lady there who insisted on peppering him with all kind of theological questions. He tried being patient with her and answering her with quotations from scripture or with explanations of the teaching of the church, but after every explanation she would say, “But what about, what about, how do you know, how do you know ...?” On and on it went. She refused to accept any of his replies. Finally he interrupted her and said, “You must be a very inexperienced boat traveler.”

“What do you mean?” she said. He replied, “As you got on the boat I noticed that you put your left foot on board first. Everyone knows that it is just asking for bad luck to board a boat by putting your left foot on first.” The woman just said, “HmMMM”

The next afternoon the same group of friends again took a boat ride and the Pastor couldn’t help but notice that the woman nearly tripped over her own feet making sure that she stepped aboard the boat placing her right foot first. He managed to keep mouth shut but couldn’t help marveling at how easily she believed something he had just made up but how reluctant she was to be open to God’s word in her heart.

Jesus is saying here, “Don’t look for the miracle in the sky. Look for my grace to be revealed in the thin places of your lives. Rely upon my word. Seek my word. Make time for my word. Nurture my word in your lives.

And he then gives another word of caution as well. He says, “Beware. Stay Alert!” Now I want to be very careful here because there are many who are already operating in a state of sleep deprivation, especially at this time of year. With all there is to do to get ready for the holidays, nobody needs to tell us to “stay awake.” But let us be clear that while the world’s sense of busyness may seem to be pointed toward getting ready for Christmas, we are called to a different kind of attentiveness, a different kind of patience in waiting. It is not only possible but even likely that the flurry of activity of the season can cause us to be asleep to much of what really matters.

So what IS Jesus calling us to be attentive to? On Thanksgiving Day we were in Orlando. As we drove up to my sister’s home a radio program came on Public Radio that we used to listen to every day when we lived in Daytona Beach. It comes on every day at 11 AM but it can be listened to at your convenience on the internet. It only lasts five minutes; it is by Garrison Keillor, and it is called Writer’s Almanac. It is one of the few places I know of on radio where you can regularly hear poetry read. This is the poem he read for Thanksgiving Day. It talks about a bird that some of you from up north may be familiar with, we don’t have them down here. It is called a Nuthatch. The poem is by Mary Oliver. It is about feeding a bird by hand.²

Winter and the Nuthatch

by [Mary Oliver](#)

Once or twice and maybe again, who knows,
the timid nuthatch will come to me
if I stand still, with something good to eat in my hand.
The first time he did it
he landed smack on his belly, as though
the legs wouldn't cooperate. The next time
he was bolder. Then he became absolutely
wild about those walnuts.

But there was a morning I came late and, guess what,
the nuthatch was flying into a stranger's hand.
To speak plainly, I felt betrayed.
I wanted to say: Mister,
that nuthatch and I have a relationship.
It took hours of standing in the snow
before he would drop from the tree and trust my fingers.
But I didn't say anything.
Nobody owns the sky or the trees.
Nobody owns the hearts of birds.
Still, being human and partial therefore to my own
successes—
though not resentful of others fashioning theirs—

² From The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor from 27 November 2008.

I'll come tomorrow, I believe, quite early.

I believe that poem expresses what Jesus cautions us to beware of and alert to, our own sense to possessiveness. It is as if Christ is saying, Yes, you have won the election, I have voted for you, but my vote for you will never come into its full authority until you surrender yourself completely to me by also cherishing my vote in every one of your brothers and sisters as well. The hope that is the gift of the gospel is poured into our hearts, but it is never to be hoarded by us.

I believe that calls for a daily attentiveness for each one of us.

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

Rev Stephen Hoffman
30 November 2008
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto