

Sermon "Hope: What God Has up God's Sleeve" Mark 13:24-37 Isaiah 11:1-9 11/30/14

The man didn't vote this year. He didn't vote two years ago. He won't vote in 2016. His reason? "It doesn't make any difference whether I vote or not... Nothing will change. Politicians will do their thing, serve their own interests or the one who pays them enough... Same old story, nothing new. The rich get attention and the poor get the shaft. Doesn't matter who's holding an office. Nothing will change."

Perhaps you've felt this way, if not about political leadership, then about some other aspect of your life, where it seems that there's no way things can get better. Your financial situation, your health, your marriage, your relationship with a son or daughter, or your own reactions to things... Somehow, you feel powerless... Nothing you try seems to make things better... So why try?

In the eleventh chapter of the Book of Isaiah, there was given a picture of the rule of Immanuel, a picture of hope offered to people who were feeling totally overwhelmed by life. They were threatened by more powerful nations, and many had totally failed to trust or serve God... There was much poverty, and just as much injustice. Folks were suffering and afraid. They felt powerless and abandoned... Like a cut-down tree.

To these people, Isaiah gave God's promise that God was going to do something NEW: "But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom... He shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land's afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked... The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, ... The calf and young lion shall browse together... There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as waters cover the sea." (selected verses) God will do something new.

Today we begin the season of Advent. During these four Sundays, we will try to open our hearts to God's promise that God is YET doing something new. God certainly did something remarkable when the Bethlehem child revealed God's love in human form, all the way to the grave and beyond. According to Jesus, as we heard him in the 13th chapter of Mark's gospel, God has even more up his holy sleeve.

So wherever we feel complacent, we'd better stop and remember why we're a church. We are here to turn our attention to God, and to focus on God's love - poured out visibly for this world in the person of Jesus, and to remember that for some reason God refuses to give up on us. Whenever we feel overwhelmed or outdone in this world, we need to remember that our Lord came to bring light to those who cannot find light in their own lives and hope for those who cannot save themselves... Our God is even today, in 2014, bringing forth something new, even if we don't see it. Like a thief in the night, it probably will not be as we expect it to be; that's part of the excitement and adventure of it. We must have our eyes and hearts watching so that we will notice what God is doing right in our midst, even here in our very lives!

For the past three weeks we have heard "wake-up" scriptures. First, the parable of the talents,

then the story of the unprepared bridesmaids, and last Sunday, Jesus' teaching about the Last Judgment, where the sheep and goats were separated, not by whether they came across needy people in their lives, but whether or not they RESPONDED to the needs... Wake up.

Today, we are again urged to wake up, to see that, whether we are comfortable in our living or struggling desperately, God is not finished. Our Creator is still involved in this world, and one day, when we don't expect it, something new and world-changing will be brought forth as God wills it. Advent gives us a liturgical period during which we must make sure that we are ready.

Too often we are not ready; we are not attuned to the challenge and blessings of our faith, so others do not experience much of God's love through us. But it's not too late for us to be changed.

Years ago, Preacher/professor Fred Craddock shared in his book, *Craddock Stories*, about how his father late in life gained new, life-giving perspective. In Craddock's words: "My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, 'I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge.' That's what he always said.

"Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, 'There's one now, sic him, get him.' Every time, my mother stayed in the kitchen, always nervous, fearful of flaring tempers or somebody being hurt. And always my father said, 'The church doesn't care about me. The church just wants another name and another pledge.' I guess I heard it a thousand times.

"One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, 'It's too late.' They put in a metal tube, and x-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat it, had a flower on it. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

"He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written that line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.'

"I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?' And he wrote, 'I was wrong.'" (*Craddock Stories*, p. 14)

It would seem that one challenge we face as Christians today is to prove people wrong about their negative impressions of churches and their lack of expectations when it comes to God. Now we cannot prove anybody wrong by trying to railroad them into believing what we believe or shaming them into accepting Jesus Christ. As I see it, the only way to help folks get a new

perspective on church and on God is by showing them that we do care, and believing ourselves that God does care. Part of that challenge is to let our OWN perspectives be made new, and to ask God every day to show us how we can be useful to *God's* purposes this day.

Earlier this week I was totally overdone, panicked over all the things on my plate and my sense of being unable to deal with them. Today's charge conference with all the not-yet-done reports, Thursday's Thanksgiving dinner with the threatening weather forecast and the uncertainty as to how many Winsted folks might come, the newsletter that I had yet to pull together and print, the community Thanksgiving sermon I had to prepare, and the upcoming concerts of the Farmington Valley Chorale for which I am to be the reader. Then our daughter called offering to come home on Friday, and I was totally frazzled and disgusted with myself for being so. Woody told me that he was worried that I would "stroke out," and I felt the same way. I finally got to bed and finally slept, only to awaken about 5 a.m. with a full case of anxiety. My breathing was barely touching my lungs because of all the catches. I lay in my bed trying to get a sense of God, silently saying the 23rd Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 4:8, which talks about the perfect peace the one who trusts God will have. Nothing worked. I felt everything rushing in on me, and I was powerless to control it. It was similar to my experience this summer of kayaking on the Farmington River north of New Hartford. I was dumped three times, and the third time I really thought I was going to drown, for I simply did not have the strength to hold on any longer. Fortunately, on the Farmington I was able to swim to shore. But Tuesday morning in my bed I could do nothing but finally cry out to God for help. I felt far from God and powerless to focus on anything long enough to give God a grip, but suddenly things changed for me. I could breathe, deeply, without a catch. My heart slowed down, and it hit me that God had saved me. As soon as Woody woke up, I told him, "I believe that God healed me," and it's true. God healed me. I knew God was with me, that God loves me, and that I do not have to be afraid. Isaiah 41:10 was whispered in my heart, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." God is with us, and every now and then we learn the truth of the promises we preach and hear.

In a 2003 sermon, Rev. Billy Strayhorn told of a young boy who was asked to offer the Thanksgiving Day prayer for his family. His prayer: "Dear God, this is Jimmy. Thank you for Thanksgiving and Christmas and all of the holidays. Thank you for the turkey and dressing and Mom and Dad and even for my little sister, even though sometimes she can be a pain. Thank you for books and TV and game boy. Thank you for loving us. Oh, yeah. And take care of yourself, God. Because without you, we're sunk. Amen."

Without God, we're sunk! Our world is filled with disagreement and prejudice and bubbling angers and huge helpings of fear. Whether it's the kind of deep mistrust and disrespect that led to Ferguson, MO, or the oppression and generations of anger that have offered fertile ground for ISIS/ISIL (the Islamic State), or the ravages of Ebola, or the insurmountable gap between people barely surviving and people loaded with incredible wealth, our world is sunk without God.

The Bible promises us, though, that God is not finished with any of us yet! Salvation is here and it is coming. We never know what God will do next, what God has up God's heavenly sleeve! But we are promised that God is still in control, and that God still listens for and responds to our

cries for help. For this reason, we have hope.

If your life makes you feel that God doesn't care, you are invited to learn that you are wrong this Advent season. Advent is about the Light of God's love coming right into wherever the world is most dark. Watch for it, pray for it, hope for it, work for it. God's Word and God's Work are trustworthy and powerful: "The earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:9) God is bringing forth something new. May it be so in our lives. Amen.