

Oh, You'd Better Watch Out!

Sterling UMC
November 29, 2009
Mark 13:32-37

It always feels strange beginning Advent in November. But the stores have been decorated for Christmas since Halloween, so why not? I hope the department stores won't think we're trying to spoil their party by injecting a little religion into this busy season of the year.

It reminds me of an item that appeared in USA Today a couple of years ago about this time. Authorities in Bal Harbor, FL outfitted the baby Jesus in their outdoor Nativity Scene with a GPS locator as a protection against thieves. The previous Baby Jesus was stolen even though it had been bolted down. "I don't anticipate this will ever happen again," said Dina Cellini, who oversees the display, "but we may need to rely on technology to save our Savior. The Mary and Joseph statues will also be outfitted with GPS."

Interesting! Somebody stole the baby Jesus. I'm not surprised. They've already stolen Christmas. I'm exaggerating, of course. Still, I'm thankful you are here today as we seek to reflect on the meaning of Christ's coming into the world.

I thought, just to add interest to our services this Advent, I would use some of my favorite Christmas songs to introduce our sermon ideas. After all, what would we do during Advent and Christmas without music? Studies show that listening to Christmas carols boosts our spirits. It also regulates our heart rate and breathing which, in turn, reduces stress. In other words, listening to Christmas music is good for us.

For these Advent sermons, I'm going to use popular as well as standard religious music as a means of focusing our thoughts on the great themes that this special season suggests.

Now, there are some Christmas songs that I decided to eliminate from consideration right from the beginning. Songs like "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." According to one survey, "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" is now the most requested Christmas song ever, and has sold more than 10 million copies. It also spawned a MTV video. I will add, however, that some polls also rate it the most hated Christmas song of all time. I can't imagine why. Anyway, I decided not to use it.

I decided instead that the familiar first line of the popular song "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" would better fit this first Sunday in Advent. This Christmas tune sounds very much like an effort by parents to get children to behave themselves during the next few weeks: "Oh, you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town." And especially those lines, "He's making his list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice."

Some people think of God that way. And they read the same kind of warning into our Scripture for today from Mark's Gospel. Speaking of his return, Jesus told his disciples,

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.

It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

So my message on this first Sunday in Advent is you better watch out, because whether we are ready or not the Lord is coming. The Lord who came in the past, comes to us in this present time, and he will come at the end of all things.

Let us first recall the past, that first silent and holy night when the angels sang and Mary wrapped the babe in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. It is our faith that on that specific night, in that special place, in that child Jesus, God himself made his appearance in this world. It was the advent of God, the creator visiting his creation.

Not everyone in the world was ready for him to come. There was no room for him in the inn. Neither was Herod the king ready. How could one who already ruled be ready for another king?

Neither were the scribes and the Pharisees nor the rich and powerful. They were already in command and doing very well on their own. What need had they for a savior? They were not sick. What need had they for a physician?

But there were a few who were ready and opened their hearts and their souls to him. The publicans, sinners, and harlots needed mercy. They yearned for acceptance. They were ready for help. They knew they were sick. The crippled and the blind, the lepers and the paralyzed were ready. They knew they were in need. They received him gladly. They were hungry and thirsty for wholeness. They ate and drank with him. Some left all and followed him.

The first Christmas story is not a story of men and women who finally found God. It is a story of a God who confronted men and women, who took them by surprise. Mary and Joseph didn't search for the Lord. He came and amazed them. Peter and Paul weren't looking for God. Peter was fishing. Paul was on a journey. But suddenly they were face to face with the divine presence and had to say yes or no. Herod didn't even want God to appear. The Scribes and Pharisees had other ideas of how the Lord should act, but whether they were ready or not, they had to deal with Jesus.

So today, as we look forward to Christmas, we remember the past and that first Christmas when Jesus came to a world part ready and part not ready at all. A few received him and most rejected him, but there was no doubt in the hearts of believers that God came into the world.

This leads me from the past tense to the present tense. Advent is not just a time to look back almost 2,000 years to the good old days. It is not just a season for a sentimental journey in our imagination to the little town of Bethlehem.

In Advent we open our eyes to the Lord who is even now breaking into this world and who at this very moment is active in this history of this world. There are many in this world who believe that the meaning and purpose of life is for us to "find God," when in reality the issue is radically different. Our problem is that, ready or not, God comes and finds us and we can no longer equivocate. We must say yes or no. Our Lord is not just a

memory from the past, locked up in creeds and codes and buried safely under 20 centuries of religion.

We believe in a living Lord, who even now, ready or not, is coming into lives and intruding into this world, and there is no hiding place in which we can crouch and avoid his presence. There is no darkness that can cover us.

In Advent we give attention to a God who comes to us and our world in the present. He comes! As one hymn writer says, "He speaks to me everywhere." Sometimes we find ourselves receiving him, and sometimes we find ourselves rejecting him.

But the message of Advent is that ready or not, God comes. The question is, what do you do when he comes?

Jesus has come in the distant past. Jesus comes now to heal those who receive him and to destroy all that bruises and crushes his people. But that is not the last word. There is a third dimension to this season of advent.

This world of ours is not eternal. It had a beginning, and it will have an end.

In our Scripture lesson this morning we hear Jesus' words about his Second Coming rather than his first. Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection. But he wanted them to know he would be returning for them. Jesus says in our lesson from the Gospel regarding his return that we are to live in a spirit of watchfulness like children eagerly waiting for Christmas Day.

"Be on guard! Be alert!" Jesus says. "You do not know when the time will come. It's like a man going away. He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch, for they do not know when the owner will return. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping."

Jesus is quick to remind us that although many down through the years have tried to speculate we don't know when it will happen and we don't know the details of what's coming. Therefore, rather than sitting around worrying about it, let's focus on how Christ wants us to live here and now. That's the purpose of today's lesson from Mark. It is to remind us of two essential truths: One, the future is in God's hands, not ours. And two, we can trust God for the future.

Let's begin with truth one: the future is in God's hands, not ours. Just as we don't know when Christ's return will be, so also we don't know what the future may hold. Some people are excited about the future. They see cures for cancer and all manner of diseases. They see human beings routinely living in good health 100 years or more.

But there are others who warn of the threat that another cold war with China, Russia, or both could replace terrorism as the chief foreign-policy concern of the United States. Also of deep concern is climate change with the disappearance of much of our bio-diversity, widespread flooding and water replacing oil as the most precious commodity on earth.

How much of this will occur? No one knows. But here's what we do know. The same God who sent a tiny babe 2,000 years ago to redeem our world is the same God who holds the future. "He's got the whole world in His hands." God loves His creation with a love that cannot be comprehended. Here's what you and I need to do. Make good decisions about the future to the best of our ability and then trust God. The future is in God's hands, not ours.

The future is in God's hands, and that leads to the second truth, we can trust God for whatever may come. This is not to say that we should ignore Christ's words about his return. He wants us to live expectantly, but it would be a travesty if the words of the one who constantly reassured his disciples to "Fear not, I have overcome the world," should be distorted by slipshod biblical interpretation to cause fear in the ones who love him today. Christ will return someday, but it will be an occasion of rejoicing, not of heartbreak and fear.

Jesus says, "Watch!" Live in expectancy of that great day. Live in a sense of anticipation that the one who loves you most, the one who gave his life for you, is about to return. When we live in expectancy, we have a vivid sense of God's presence and direction in our lives. We are alert to his leading and alive to the Spirit's moving within us. A spirit of expectancy and a life-style of preparation will inevitably result in an attitude of readiness. We do not know when Christ's second Advent may be. But Jesus calls us to use the reality of his return as a constant reminder that we must be ready for his return, for when we live in readiness, then we are best prepared to serve faithfully and effectively in the days until he returns.

This morning as we count-down to Christmas, I remind you Christ is coming. He has come in the past. He comes to us in the present. And the day's coming, when Jesus Christ will return, and it will be a grand and glorious day. Get ready. No one knows when it will be. But get ready. No one knows what shape it will take, but we know this: God's in charge and God can be trusted. "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"