

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“LIVING IN HOPEFUL EXPECTANCY”
Mark 13:24-37
November 30, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 AM Services**

At the beginning of the Advent season, we remember the time when the world still waited in darkness for the Messiah. This retrospection reminds us that Christ has indeed come and is alive in our world today.

Jesus warned his disciples about the danger of going to sleep at the wheel. He calls us to a life of faith that is awake and alert to the new things God is doing in the world, such as forgiving what is past and opening a way to the future.

Because the Bible is a testimony from ancient times, and because Jesus lived two thousand years ago, many people think of Christianity as a religion of the past. Faith is a matter of believing in Christ's coming in the past. But Christianity is a religion of past, present, and future. In Christ we are blessed with great hope for the future.

The word “**tense**” usually refers to someone's physical or emotional state. For example: “**Speaking in front of a group makes some people tense.**” But “**tense**” can also mean “**time.**” The New Testament speaks of the coming of Christ in three tenses: the past, the present, and the future. Historically, he came to earth in the miracle of the Incarnation. This is past tense. Experientially, he comes to us in the midst of our lives day by day. This is present tense. Prophetically, he will return to earth at some appointed time known only to God. This is future tense. Our scripture lesson for this first Sunday of Advent focuses on this third dimension, the future.

The form of Christ's coming in the future may not have been very important to the first Christians, but the fact of his coming was a primary

part of their faith. Religious and philosophical thought in the first-century world tended to see history as cyclical, as an endless series of cycles. Biblical faith, however, stood in contrast to this view of endless repetition. As my Old Testament professor, Dr. Hazzard at Wesley Seminary said, “History is going somewhere.” The people of God are always moving out of the past and in the direction of God’s future. The followers of Christ saw themselves as part of a great drama, moving toward an ultimate fulfillment. The return of Christ marks that fulfillment.

The form of Christ’s coming has been a matter of much speculation in more recent times. Some have insisted that it must be understood literally, exactly as it is described biblically. But it is difficult for others to imagine a visible coming of Christ, especially with him appearing among the clouds. If the literal concept of Christ’s coming is real to someone, we have no desire to refute it. But if it is unreal to others, we need not limit ourselves to a literal understanding. We believe that Christ is with us now. Yet we acknowledge that his presence is invisible and intangible.

The central meaning of Christ’s return is that faith is forward-looking. The past is vitally important as a source of insight and inspiration. Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. But our hope is not in the past. It is in the future. ***“No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Co 2:9)*** Whatever form it takes, Christ’s ultimate return represents the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes.

When will Christ return? This question has generated speculation in every generation of Christian believers. Some in every generation have believed that Christ would return in their lifetimes. This has happened despite Jesus’ own words that no one knows when this extraordinary event will happen, not even he himself. (cf. Mt 24:36) On the basis of Jesus’ statement, we are wise to ignore the predictions of those who claim special insight or revelation. We should especially avoid those who use such predictions to manipulate the emotions of people for **“evangelistic”** purposes.

The perspective of Jesus and the writers of the New Testament on this subject should be made clear. While they believed that no one knew the time of Christ’s return, they saw the reality of Christ’s return as important to faith in Christ. They also believed that an awareness that Christ could return

at any time kept the believer watchful, alert, and committed to God's kingdom. Jesus' parable in Mark 13 addresses this conviction. A man is going on a journey and puts his servants in charge of his affairs. He tells the doorkeeper to be watchful on behalf of the other servants, for the master could return at any time. Good servants would not want to be found sleeping if the master arrives suddenly. So, Jesus said to his disciples, ***“Keep awake!”***

This way of anticipating specific future events is not altogether practical, or even possible. But there are things that are only going to happen once. We all know that we will die, but we do not know when. It is the essence of wisdom to anticipate this event and make appropriate preparation for it. In a sense, we should live every day as if it were the last day of our lives. Good intentions should be converted into good actions. Things we have always meant to do, or to say, need to be done or said. We need to ***“keep awake”*** to the fact that time passes quickly and that life is short.

All that we have said could create in us a negative kind of anticipation. One day, maybe sooner than we think, we will die! One day, only God knows when, Christ's return will bring down the curtain on history! These can easily become unpleasant, even life-denying, thoughts. Jesus, however, wanted the promise of his eventual return to be a source of courage and comfort to his followers. As his disciples, they were not moving toward darkness and defeat, or toward an uncertain future. They were moving toward the full realization of the kingdom of God. The end would bring a confirmation of all the things Christ had taught them to believe, the fulfillment of the faith, hope, and love they had known only in part. This was good news.

We are not to become, as it is said, **“so otherly-worldly that we are no earthly good.”** But the future for the faithful is full of hopeful expectancy. Langston Hughes wrote expectantly of tomorrow: **“I am the darker brother / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes. / But I laugh, / and eat well, / And grow strong. / “Tomorrow / I'll sit at the table / When company comes / Nobody'll dare / Say to me, / ‘Eat in the kitchen’ / Then. / “Besides, they'll see how / beautiful I am / And be ashamed.”**

The only safe way to drive an automobile is to pay careful attention both to what lies behind us and to what lies ahead of us. This is also the only

wise way to go through life. We must learn from the past without becoming a prisoner of the past. We must have hope in the future without trying to control the future. Being in touch with the past and open to the future is the secret of true wisdom.

“History is going somewhere.” Listen to the words of Isaiah 40:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

I invite you to move toward the full realization of the kingdom of God. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians;

“Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.