



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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November 30, 2014
1st Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“Don't Miss the Boat”

When the time changes in November I sleep more. Probably that is because I do not like darkness or cold weather, both of which are gloomy. This is a time when many people fall into a state of depression. Just when we have finished celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations are right around the corner, why don't we feel happy and celebratory?

Today's message, launching us into Advent, is also a gloomy one. It is called “the little apocalypse” and was probably written around the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The reading draws from material found in the Old Testament book of Daniel, material used in the “left behind” series to try to predict the end of our world as we know it. Remember when the year 2000 rolled around and there were dire predictions? That wasn't the first time in history that we human beings have tried to predict the end of the world. It happened at the turn of the first millennium as well, at the end of the year 999 when commerce stopped and people barricaded themselves in their homes with fear and trembling. It almost seems that we want the world we know to come to a startling halt. We want the bright light to either go out completely or come on suddenly and at a precise, predesignated time. Then we will be prepared. We don't like “not knowing” the precise time of expected events. How do you prepare for a guest that tells you, “I will arrive sometime next year, or maybe not next year, maybe the year after or the year after that”? Well, we would have to be prepared every single day then, wouldn't we?

Waiting makes us anxious. And we tend to do things to relieve our anxiety that are escapist. One of those things is to sleep. Another is to get so engrossed in an activity that we don't have to pay attention to our anxiety. Or we find our comfort zone and refused to move from the complacency it lulls us into. The problem with these solutions is that we are not fully awake to the present moment.

We are not fully awake to the surprises God has in store for us. If God should come to us we would not even take the time to look up. We would not even recognize God standing before us. Anxiety can take us to very dark places where God seems to be nothing but a shadowy figure.

Darkness can take many forms. Sometimes it comes in what seems to us to be never ending suffering, our own or the suffering of a loved one. Sometimes it comes in the form of boredom, even boredom of the coming Christmas season, even dread of the holidays. Sometimes darkness comes in the emptiness of our souls when no matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to make that magic connection with the Divine. And sometimes it comes when we are faced with a challenging change to the predictable and comfortable way we have become accustomed to living our lives. Darkness can come on suddenly but it can also sneak up on us a little at a time until we wake up one day and realize how short the days have become and how oppressive.

Light seems to have gone away, but it will come again, the prophets promise us. We will not remain in darkness forever. God is faithful, even in the emptiest or most difficult moments of our lives. When we least expect it to happen, a faint star appears in the east, leading us to places we never expected to go. The light is only a hint on the horizon, but if we are not awake and aware, we could sleep through it.

Yesterday was the day set aside for the hanging of the greens which as you look around you will see are absolutely stunning. We had a team showing up at 9:00 to help with the hanging so I arrived at 8:30 to get ready. Since you have put me in charge of things for a time I thought it would be a good idea to show up to help with this. Erika told me that everything we needed was in a “closet” off Youth Hall. I found this “closet” which was dark inside, but I couldn't find a light. I groped around a bit and found some wreaths hanging on the wall which I took down. I could barely see but I pulled out a plastic container with a Christmas tree packed inside. Soon Bill Creighton arrived and pointed out to me the sign that said, “light is located in the restroom by the small door”. I found the light but I'm not sure it was such a good idea to turn it on because what I saw was not a closet full of decorations, but an entire room!

I have to tell you that the thought of decorating for Christmas fills me with terror. I am not a decorator and I have no idea where to place things. When Peter told me the week before Thanksgiving that he would be happy to bring things up from the basement, I almost threw something at him. I think this dread goes back to my childhood when we had tinsel and my mother insisted that it be put on the tree one piece at a time. I just wanted to stand back and throw it on, but instead it took about a week to do it branch by branch. Baby boomers are the reason we

don't use tinsel on trees anymore – because we all had the same experience, didn't we?

Well, we loaded this room full of about 20 wreaths and 3,000 feet of garland and four Christmas trees on the dolly and set about our work. Since I cannot even move a ladder without bopping some child in the head, I decided to do what I could do best – fluff the trees. You know how artificial trees get their branches compressed when stored, well, those branches needed to be fluffed and I could do this without having to worry about whether or not an ornament was hung properly or if they were evenly dispersed.

After about an hour or so of fluffing I decided to go back to the third floor to make sure we had brought everything down. And guess what we forgot? The manger and all the figures that go in the manger. We had overlooked baby Jesus. So I loaded the manger on the dolly for one more trip down. And as I was setting it up in the parlor I realized why we are doing all of this decorating and preparation. It is all for that one little figure in the manger scene. It is all for baby Jesus.

Jesus has come into the world but we have not taken the time to look for Him in the darkness of the season. We have let him slip away from us only to realize we spent our precious moments shopping instead. We have been shopping for the plastic Jesus when the real deal has been right in front of us all along. Look at the person sitting next to you in your pew, or in the line at the grocery store, or driving in the car next to you in traffic. Find Jesus in each precious person you encounter and every detail of nature all around you. You won't find him on the shelves at Target or Wal-Mart, but you will see him in each face you greet as you ring the Salvation Army bell next week. And as you see him, you will see the faint light returning to a dark and gloomy world.

Take time to look for the light that is about to break into our world and shake us out of our complacency. This is a season to be prayerful. It is a time to be expectant. It is time to encounter the risen Lord in the midst of the brokenness and the gloomy darkness. Take time to wait on God. Be fully present and aware. Stand on the dock for as long as it takes for the boat to come so you won't miss the boat.

We are living in a time of now but not yet. Christ has come yet still we wait for him to come again, and again, and yet again. And he never fails us. Just when we think the boat is never coming, it pulls up to the dock and beckons us to board. We are not in charge of the timeline, and that is one of the most difficult lessons we have to learn.

Advent is the beginning of the year for Christians, not the end. It marks the beginning of a sacred season of our lives together. This is the beginning of a creative time when God redeems our world and makes all things new for us. We long for this work of God to come forth like the new babe about to be born in us.

We light the candle of hope this Sunday because on the very first Sunday of the new church year we are filled with the hope of new beginnings. We have no idea what God has in store for us in the coming year but we know that it is beyond anything we could ever dream of and we know that it is good. We know that the coming year will be full of new discoveries that will delight and amaze us.

Don't rush the season as the stores want us to do. I know it is easier to just go shopping than to trust in the God of great surprises. Be aware that we live in a world where Christianity is exploited for the cause of commercialism. Be aware that this is a false claim on our lives and our true call is to live counter to the consumer culture. These days of patient waiting, of embracing the darkness with keen eyes on the horizon, the days of looking in the closets of our lives for hidden treasures are precious days. Christmas will come and Christmas will go. A new year will be here before we know it. But this season of preparation has surprises for us just as wonderful as Christmas Eve. Slow down and simplify. Prepare your spiritual home for Jesus may arrive at any time, not the 24th or 25th of December, but any ordinary day. We are called to be awake and ready to receive him when he knocks on the door of our hearts.