

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2014

Wake Up! A Visitor is Coming

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November 30, 2014

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:24-37

Have you ever expected a visitor but had no idea of when he or she was coming? Perhaps it was a distant relative or an old classmate who lived a long distance away. The last time you saw each other, you said, "We really should get together more often. Please let us know when you will be in our area. We certainly would love to have you stay with us." They responded, "Yes indeed. We would love to do that."

You have all had that experience I am sure but, more often than not, the visit never happens. You might keep in touch by telephone, letters or e-mail but things never seem to work out and they don't come to visit. Time goes on. The correspondence becomes less and less frequent. Then it diminishes to exchange of Christmas cards and finally, after several years, you say to yourself, "We never hear from them anymore," and you even stop sending the cards. That has happened to most of you, if not all of you, I am sure.

You may occasionally think of that person or persons and say to yourself, "I wonder what ever happened to him or her," but the thought passes and that is the end of it.

However, once in a blue moon you get a letter or a telephone call, "Hi, I am going to be in Charlotte on a business trip. It's not far from Marion. I can get a rental car and come for a visit. It's been ages since we saw each other." Has that ever happened to you?

When I was about 12 years old, my family moved from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. It was simply amazing how many calls and letters like that we received, particularly when it was winter and snow was heavy on the ground in Pittsburgh and we were basking in the Florida sun. After we moved to Florida, we quickly found out about fair weather friends.

Our Epistle and Gospel readings this morning tell us about a visitor we have been expecting for a long time but have been wondering if that visitor was ever going to come. That visitor of course is Jesus, the Christ. We await His coming but all we know is that He promised to return but when? When? **When?**

Christian radio broadcaster Harold Camping predicted that would happen on May 21, 2011. He psyched up his followers to the extent that many of them quit their jobs and sold or gave away everything they owned expecting that they would have no need for earthly things after May 21st. Camping, of course was wrong. In fact, that was the third time that he had made such an erroneous prediction.

Camping was not fazed by his May 21 error or his previous errors. He just said that he had made a minor miscalculation and that October 21, 2011 was really the correct date. Of course, he was wrong again.

It amazes me that anyone who reads the Bible can ever come to the type of conclusions made over and over again by people like Harold Camping. Jesus clearly said that only God knows when Christ will return. Jesus himself didn't know so how in the world could anyone ever know until it actually happens.

Why then do people accept predictions such as those of Harold Camping?

It may be that many Christians over time get tired of waiting. They start out with frequent communication – reading the scriptures, attending church, prayer, etc. but as time goes on that communication becomes less and less frequent.

They keep their church membership but eventually only show up in church on Christmas and Easter, if that often, until finally they stop attending completely. Years go by. No one sees them in church and finally the church Session or Board votes to drop them from active membership and to move them to the inactive roll.

It is rather analogous to removing someone from your Christmas card list after not having heard from them for many years.

The early Christians fully expected Jesus to return in their lifetimes, but of course that didn't happen. Christ had told them that only God knew when he would return. Nevertheless, those early Christians didn't despair and strike Jesus off of their list because he hadn't returned. They kept the faith and that faith spread worldwide to many

millions of people. It continues to spread today, most evidently in South America, Africa and Asia.

The faith spreads because scripture tells us that Christ will indeed return. Nothing could be clearer than that. But when will he return? We still don't know and we won't know until it actually happens.

Unfortunately, we humans by our very nature are impatient, particularly those of us who live in the more developed parts of the world, that is North America and Western Europe. We want instant gratification; instant success; instant contact. We can't wait for things and when they don't come quickly, we tend to forget about them and seek our gratification elsewhere. Perhaps that is why, at least in part, that church membership has been declining in North America and Western Europe while it is growing dramatically in the less developed parts of the world.

Consider our children today. They want a cell phone or smart phone. Once they get it, they can't wait one minute on anything --- it is a constant stream of calls and text messages to friends that they saw only a very short time ago. Then it's Facebook and Twitter – message after message. Believe it or not studies have shown that teens send an average of 50 text messages or more per day. Nothing can wait and they expect instant response to each message. Many adults are even worse.

We need to slow down. We need to regain our patience. Jesus is not going to answer our tweets or e-mails. He will come but probably not today, tomorrow, next month or next year, but he will come. When he does, we won't get a long letter saying, "I'll see you next November 30th." You won't get an e-mail or a tweet or a cell phone call weeks in advance. It will be more like someone knocking on your door. You think, "I'm not expecting anyone. I wonder who that is." You open the door and there He is.

Should you be surprised? No you shouldn't. You should have been expecting Him all along. You just don't know when He will come.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of our gospel message says:

But the exact date and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So keep a sharp lookout, for you don't know the timetable. It's like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task, and commanding the gatekeeper to

keep watch. So stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning, whether evening, midnight, cockcrow or morning. You don't want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job. I say to you, and I'm saying it to all: "Stay at your post. Keep watch."

Peterson similarly paraphrases our epistle reading:

All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of His Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.

Keep watch. Don't be impatient. Never forget that Jesus will return. Look forward expectantly to his return and to the anniversary of his birth 3-1/2 weeks from today.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year.

The word "advent" means "coming." The first Christians spoke of "The advent of our Lord" and of "His second advent." In just 25 days we celebrate the advent of our Lord for the first time – the time when God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. We look forward with joy to that celebration. We know when it will occur. We similarly should look forward patiently to the second advent, whenever it will be.

We can't be fair weather Christians. We need to stay in communication with God – through reading of scripture, through prayer, through being in church and through doing God's work in the community.

We won't get instant responses and we shouldn't expect them. But God will hear our messages and will smile upon us.

Now to the God of all wisdom,
who strengthens us according to the gospel,
through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. **Amen.**