

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017

**Are You Ready?**

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
December 3, 2017

Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of the church year. If you think about it, when will be the fourth Sunday of Advent this year --- Christmas Eve? That has not happened during my tenure as a pastor. It is a rare occurrence.

Last week was Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the church year. Did you notice that it was after Thanksgiving, not before as is typically the case?

Why this year are special days which the church observes not falling when they usually do? Has something changed?

No it has not. The anomaly this year is simply because the church does not follow the secular calendar. The church year begins with the first Sunday of Advent, four Sundays before Christmas Day and ends on the Sunday before Advent. It does not consider when Thanksgiving Day or Black Friday is. Thanksgiving is not a church holy day and in fact in Canada is celebrated in early November. Most countries don't celebrate it at all.

Christmas, Advent, Easter and Christ the King Sunday are universal. They are celebrated by all Christians everywhere. Secular holidays vary and are often changed for political or other reasons but Christian holy days are not secular holidays.

Christmas, except for the Eastern Orthodox Church, is always December 25 and Advent begins four Sundays earlier.

Good Friday and Easter occurs on the dates which approximate the days of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection which occurred during the Jewish Passover. The date of Passover is based upon the time of the first full moon following the vernal equinox. The date varies and thus so do Easter, Palm Sunday, Lent, Good Friday, Ascension Day and Pentecost.

Confusing? Yes it can be but the point is that the church calendar is determined by Christmas Day when we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior and Easter Sunday when we celebrate his resurrection.

The church year begins on the first Sunday of Advent, the time when we look forward not to celebrating the birth of Christ but to anticipating his second coming. Advent is a time when we should be asking if we are ready for his return. Are you ready? I certainly hope so but in the hub bub of the commercialization of Christmas we often overlook the real reason for celebrating Advent. Instead we get caught up in preparations for Christmas.

The Christmas story is so familiar to us that it seems like we are watching a favorite movie over and over again according to Theresa Cho <sup>(1)</sup>. Christmas to each of us is so full of secular traditions that they dominate what we do and say during Advent and take our thoughts away from being ready for Christ's return.

Theresa Cho commented that, *"If the story of the Birth of Christ is our favorite movie, then today's scripture reads like a movie trailer. Imagine the voice-over setting the scene: 'In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon will give its light ... 'The camera pans over a fig tree that is beginning to sprout new branches, shoots, and leaves. The voice-over continues '... but nobody knows when that day and hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows.' The trailer ends, 'Watch out! Stay alert!' This trailer shades this familiar birth story of cute sheep, wise men with gifts, holy angels, and curious shepherds into a suspenseful, action-filled, ominous plot titled 'Advent Apocalypse.'"*

Cho comments that reading the Christmas story this way certainly is not how we tell it to our children. Advent is a time of preparation, of expectation, and of waiting. But what are we waiting for? What are we getting ready for? The birth of a baby or something else?

A movie trailer typically ends with a release date, the date when the movie will be in theaters. But note that there is no stated release date here.

The scripture reading cites the parable of a fig tree putting forth its leaves when summer is near. In the reading Jesus says, *"When you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door"* referring to the time of the second coming.

Do you see the sense of urgency here? It is not describing an event in the far distant future, it is describing the here and now. We can't be complacent. We must be ready.

And how do we get ready? By living our lives on constant alert, by being aware of

the beauty and the miracles of God's creation, and, as Cho says, by "... *not denying the ways that Jesus speaks to us and calls us.*"

We need to be ever on the lookout for ways to make known God's grace, his generosity, his love, and all that he has provided for us.

These Days (December 6, 2013) likened Advent to how a hound is ever alert to everything around him --- sounds, sights, smells, etc. The hound always seems to be on guard about things and will abruptly bolt and go after things which interest him. The article concluded with "*The call of Advent is to be mindful, cognizant, and perceptive of God's coming presence in the world around us. We perceive this by faith. We must be alert, because God shows up at unexpected and inopportune times.*"

The article admonishes us to "*Be watchful for moments that God shows up in your life --- even the unexpected and unforeseen places and times.*"

Theresa Cho asked, "*What if we entered into the Advent season already out in the fields like the shepherds, ready to receive the angel's message that the time has come, or like the astronomers, constantly searching until they spot the star that will guide them to what they have been looking for.*"

*"Stay tuned. Stay alert. The story we think we know so well may just have a twist we didn't quite expect."*

Are you ready?

**Amen**

(1) Theresa Cho in "A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series," Westminster John Know Press. Louisville, KY, 2016

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011