

Romans 13: 11-14
Matthew 24: 36-44
November 27, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
First Sunday of Advent

Today on the first Sunday of Advent we begin a journey which sets us apart from our culture. Indeed it not only sets us apart, it also potentially puts us at odds with our culture. I will not wring my hands about the commercialization of Christmas. That train left the station over 1500 years ago when the church chose to celebrate Jesus' birth in opposition to the Roman Solstice festival celebrating the god, Saturn. The Roman festival won because it was more fun. Ever since, the celebration of the birth of Jesus has been in competition with the time of eating, drinking and gift giving. Over time, particularly beginning in the 19th century, the festival became the driving force of the season. The church reached a truce with the festival. As long as people went to church to acknowledge Jesus the King of kings and Lord of lords, there was no harm in having a good time.

Yet as the new century came and the culture became more secular the festival tail came to wag the spiritual dog until the current season resembles a Pekinese with the tail of a German shepherd.

Yet in truth, we Christians cannot self-righteously condemn secular culture for this development. We must take responsibility for creating the environment where the festival could take over the spiritual reason for the season. I propose that in large part the triumph of the festival derives from our loss of faith in Jesus' return.

Today from Matthew's Gospel we hear part of an extended teaching about the end of human history. There are two equally strong themes. First—*the time is coming!* This is not a myth. It is not an empty threat. The disciples and future believers are to put their full trust that what God has promised to do as announced by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus *will happen*. There is therefore *urgency* to life. Believers must be *attentive to the present moment*. They must live *in expectation*. This expectation must be open-ended. Jesus says that not even *he* knows when this time will come. Such knowledge is hidden deep within God's heart. But Jesus warns the people never to doubt for a moment that the Son of Man will come.

In the twenty-fifth chapter, Jesus tells parables warning of complacency and unbelief. Jesus gives teaching on *how* we are to live in this waiting time. We are certainly *not* to be sitting on our hands. We are certainly *not* to be climbing mountains and waiting for the end. Beginning with Paul and continuing into the earliest teachings of the church fathers, what we experience as delay is a sign of God's patience and mercy allowing for the message of Jesus to spread so that the world might be saved and no one human being perish.

The call on the life of believers is powerfully and unmistakably presented at the end of the chapter which pictures the return of the Son of Man. When he arrives he has just one interest: who fed the hungry; who clothed the naked; who visited the sick and those in prison? In short, who continued to do the work of Jesus? Who proclaimed his kingdom by living by Jesus' values and priorities? Who cared about the people and concerns that Jesus cared about when he walked the earth?

Paul in his Letter to the Romans changes the focus to the personal conduct of believers; yet the connection with faith in Jesus' return is the same. Paul devoutly expects the day of the

Lord will happen in his lifetime. It informs his every teaching. It is the animating principle of his life. Because the day of the Lord's return is knocking on the door of human history, people of faith must live lives which demonstrate their readiness to welcome Jesus when he returns. They are to walk in the light of expectation. They must lay aside all behavior which displays the power of darkness. Paul gives concrete examples: they must live honorably—that is, live their lives which inspires admiration and causes people to speak well of the faith. They must *not engage* sensual self-indulgence. They must not be full of jealousy and envy. In short, believers must live the values of the coming kingdom, not in the life of instant gratification which is the hallmark of the worldly life.

Paul connects walking in the light with faith and expectation. He links the self-indulgent life with despair. If there is no expectation that Jesus is returning to judge the living and the dead, or to separate the sheep and the goats, why deny ourselves? Why not eat, drink and be merry? Why not have our spiritual cake and it too by eating too much, drinking too much and spending too much? Pretty soon we begin to deny the spiritual cake all together and just eat the icing. Then we feel sick.

There is a calling for Christians in this advent season. It is to reclaim a faith so full of hope and expectation that we remind the world that there is a higher purpose to life than the worldly celebration of the festival of the holidays. There is calling to seek to become a living example of what the kingdom of God might look like with real flesh and blood people.

That calling has two parts. The first part is to rejoice that the good News of Jesus Christ *has happened!* The powerful love of God in Jesus *has already been given!* Part of the journey of advent is to follow the star and rediscover the joy of Jesus' birth. To borrow from theologian

Marcus Borg, it is the opportunity to meet the infant Jesus again, *for the first time*, as people who have walked another year with him.

The second part is this: to live lives of expectation that the work of Jesus is not complete. The world is full of darkness and it is easy to live as if the darkness has won and there is no Savior. But we who trust Jesus when he says that his kingdom is meant to be manifested on earth as it is in heaven know that his work is not done. How will people who have only the festival to experience discover the light and peace of the Prince of Peace? We must live honorably, graciously, compassionately and hopefully. We must make it clear that we are journeying again to find the savior and to be the evidence that he has not abandoned the world. He lives among us by the Holy Spirit causing us to be his Good News in the world. Amen.