

Romans 13: 11-14
Matthew 24: 36-44
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
November 28, 2010
First Sunday of Advent

In his commentary on the passage from Matthew, David Bartlett quotes biblical scholar Krister Stendahl in this way:

...we misread our congregations if we think they are most often puzzling about the eternal life of each individual. On the contrary, contemporary Christians are most often puzzling about whether history has any significance. (Feasting of the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, p.22)

This morning we begin once again the journey of the Christian season of Advent. Among all the seasons of the church year, Advent pre-eminently affirms without embarrassment or apology, “*Yes, history has significance!*” Today we begin a journey which proclaims that God intervened in human history through the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. We look forward to celebrating the birth of the Christ-child in Bethlehem. We do this *not* because the wheel of time has once again turned and we do what we are conditioned to do—celebrate Christmas. The festival which officially begins with Black Friday known as “the Holidays” is such an event. “The Holidays” *are* a sign of the incessant movement of time—the turning of the wheel. The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes reflected on this cycle of time and pronounced it to be meaningless. And so it is. The true symbol of this phase of the turning of the wheel of time is the cast off tree, the discarded wreath, the returned gifts and the credit card bill.

As Christians we participate in this annual festival. Many of us enjoy it without guilt. Truthfully, I have come to love this time of year; especially the part where you try

to shorten my life with high concentrations of butter and sugar. But the reason I enjoy the festival is because I know that the season has a meaning which transcends the turning of the wheel of time. Not only is there meaning to the season; it is profound and touches the whole of my life and the life of the world. The meaning transcends the short period that begins today and carries through the twelve days of Christmastide. Indeed the meaning of the season embraces all time: past, present and future. It is a truth that is just as true in July as it will be on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

When we begin to contemplate the depth of this season all else pales in significance as the stars in the first rays of morning light. And so it is that we gather to witness. We dare not witness to the “true” meaning of the season. It is too vast. The significance of the eternal Word born into the small world of human space and time cannot be packaged. It cannot be opened today and then quietly put away for another year. Before the mystery and awe of the story we can only stop, and reverently bow. It is not our job to speak, to analyze or to decide what it all means. It is our job to accept simply that we have a place in the grand pageant and to ask the Holy One to grant us the grace and peace to find it. And having found our place in the grand pageant of angels, prophets, shepherds, sheep, donkeys, emperors, inn keepers, fathers, mothers, cousins and kings, we ask simply to have the grace to be quiet, to listen to the music that sings high above the rumble of traffic and holiday preparations. We are not caught up in the shrill and shriveled debates about the meaning or lack of meaning in the events of the world.

This is a time of waiting and listening. This is a time for allowing the full story to speak and for us to allow ourselves to be moved by the story and to trust the One whose providence conceived the birth of a child to an unwed mother in a stable at the call of a

far away ruler. To trust the story of the child who grew to bring into focus all of what is holy and gracious of God in his life; and who allowed the fear, anger and despair of the world to tear his skin, break his bones, and silence his breath; and whose faith in his Heavenly Father was vindicated by his rising from the dead, wounds and all; who ascended to heaven and returned in the person of the Holy Spirit; and finally, who promises to complete his work among us. This is our calling in this sacred season. And as Jesus instructed his disciples it is not for us to seek to interpret the signs of the times.

It is for us to wait and listen. It is our calling to be moved and guided by the creator of the stars of light and to follow in the company of all who have traveled this way in faith and to make this story real to all who have nothing in this holy time but the endless and impersonal cycle of the wheel of time.

It is to witness by our faith and living out of the gospel that there is significance to history and that significance is found in the Savior, and in the life of the community that seeks to be part of the story. Amen.