**12/3/23**

**Today, People, Today!!!**

**Mark 13:24-37**

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:2, NRSV) (2) Amen.

Welcome to each and every one of you that has joined us here in our Worship Space and out there on our Conference Call this morning. I would like to welcome you all to the readings and stories that we will be exploring from Lectionary B. Huh, what did you just say Vicar Vince? Yes, I know this kind of an awkward greeting for sure. I also know that this is not something you may be all too familiar with hearing. Well, that is the fun we get to have with me continuing to learn, and me being able to impart some of that very knowledge upon you from my seminary classes too. That awareness to change is also a good thing for all of us anyways. We are reminded that we are not always stuck in some kind of rut or constant rhythm that is never changing with our worship format. You also may or may not be aware of the fact that we actually do operate out of a cycle of three lectionaries. As we close the book for another year on Lectionary A, and we move on in our liturgical calendars, we do indeed shake things up a bit. We learn or are reminded that “A time of celebration is at hand. Yes, a time of celebration is at hand, a new year begins today! But wait, Vicar Vince, this isn’t January 1st, it is December 3rd. Ah, true it is, but just the same, a new year begins today. The new church year begins today. Today begins the 1st Sunday in Advent, and the season of Advent begins the church year. You will notice something else new this morning, new paraments on the altar and pulpit. They are blue in color, because blue is the color of Advent. Blue is the color of Hope and Advent is the season of Hope, Waiting, Anticipation and Longing.” (3)

So let me set the stage as we start out our new church year together. Let me set the stage for where we will be journeying these next few weeks, as “Our Advent comprises the four Sundays before Christmas. Each year the first Sunday deals with our readiness for divine judgment, the second Sunday the ministry of John the Baptist, the third Sunday the Baptist’s call to a repentant life, and only on the fourth Sunday a narrative concerning the birth of Jesus.” (1)

As we have begun our Advent journey today, you may have noticed that we lit the first candle on our Advent Wreath that has been placed up here by the pulpit. I am also sure by now that you have noticed the trees, wreaths, banners, flowers, flags, and other various decorations that have adorned our worship space. Plus, without going to say in all this set-up and decorating we made a huge mess. So, this is where I would also like to take a brief pause and take a little bit of time out and thank everyone that assembled yesterday morning to make this place look so wonderful for our Advent Season leading up to Christmas. If you are here in the Worship Space this morning and have not wandered up here by the altar, I then encourage you to squint your eyes a little bit. As you take in the sight of the nativity set in front of the altar you will notice that I did not hide or steal baby Jesus. However, you may realize that some churches actually do not believe in putting him in there yet. They leave the crib empty. They believe that through that very Hope, Waiting, Anticipation, and Longing that he should not be in there yet. However, we are indeed reminded that his birth happened well over 2,000 years ago now. “As we enter into the Advent season, watching anxiously for the date and time on our calendars when we celebrate God’s coming among us in Christ, so may we remember that this season of preparation is also about much more than a date or an hour, but about the act of living into the fullness of God’s presence being made known in our midst.” (1) That means keeping our eyes on the very infant that has shaped and changed our world, as he indeed is the reason for the season. I also do not want anyone to have to worry if I actually remember which box that he is in in our storage closet, or if I even remember to put him in the manger scene on Christmas Eve since things can get rather busy around this time of year. I am also quite sure we will hear in the news again this year of some church having the infant stolen from their nativity. Well, the good news is that his mission and his purpose cannot be stolen from our hearts. As important as these outward examples are, they do indeed only represent something worldly. We need to remember to constantly draw our eyes and focus on him and not the distractions and problems of this world that are only temporary. We cannot and should not allow this world to steal away our forever joy, and our forever gift that we do indeed get to unwrap in Word and Worship each year together and share with others.

We must also be reminded that we are not merely planning for a baby to be born in a manger, but we are also planning for the recreation of this world when that baby returns fully-grown. In our season of Hope, Waiting, Anticipation, and Longing we learn in the opening to our Gospel Reading today “When we hear Jesus describing the coming of the Son of Man with stars falling from heaven, it can sound dire and horrible, not like anything we would ever hope for. But when we really look at the suffering of people God loves, we can share the hope that God would tear open the heavens and come.” (1) “Jesus wants to assure the disciples that God is with them during these terrible times. The world is not out of control. These events have been predicted. God is not sleeping, rather God is moving behind the scenes. Jesus has promised that he will return. He has not told us when, but he has assured us that he is coming back. When Jesus comes back, he will do so with a mighty demonstration of his power.” (4) And that is indeed why we hear the very call at the end of our Gospel Reading today to Keep Awake, to Keep Alert, and to Be Ready.

“This point of being ready can be seen in the following:

There is a story about a tourist who was traveling along the shores of Lake Como in northern Italy. When he reached the castle, a friendly old gardener opened the gate and showed him the ground which the old man kept in perfect order. The tourist asked when the owner of the castle had last been there.

"12 years ago,” the old man answered.

"Does he ever write to you? "

"No."

"From who do you get your instructions?"

"From his agent in Milan."

"Does he come?"

"Never!!"

"Who then, comes here?"

"I am almost always alone! Only once in a while a tourist comes."

"But you must keep this garden in such fine condition just as though you expected your master to come tomorrow."

The old gardener promptly replied, "Today, sir, today!!!"” (3)

What a cool little story of faith, respect, and focus! This gardener is going about his business each and every day in the continued Hope, Waiting, Anticipation, and Longing of the return of the owner of the castle. He has been provided a simple but complex job to take care of the grounds. He has been provided with the simple but complex marching orders just like each and every one of us Lutherans, or Christians sitting in these very pews and listening on the Conference Call today. We learn that this man has not lost his focus in over 12 years, despite getting limited communication or hope that the owner will ever return. I mean I am quite sure that this is how some of us feel at times when the road of life gets rough, or we do not feel like God is listening, or that he even plans to return in our lifetime. However, we should not lose that constant focus and hope that he will indeed return. It is in scripture in several places, and we relive it each and every year as we travel through our lectionaries and course of readings. We are given that blessed assurance that he will come, and he will stand up for us, and no matter how hard the road of life gets he is indeed always working behind the scenes whether we realize it or not. And remember what the gardener has taught us in the very story I just shared… do not be so focused to continue getting ready for tomorrow… you need to get ready for today, people, today!!!

Amen.

**References**

(1) Sundays and Seasons

 Preaching

 Year B 2023

 December 3rd, 2023

 First Sunday of Advent

(2) Bible.com

(3) SermonCentral.com

 Hope, Waiting, Anticipation And Longing

 Contributed by Tim Zingale on Dec 3, 2002

 Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

 Denomination: Lutheran

(4) SermonCentral.com

 The Miracle Of Anticipation Series

 Contributed by Kevin Ruffcorn on Dec 1, 2005

 Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

 Denomination: Lutheran

 Stir up your power, and come! The psalmist’s plea in Psalm 80:2 has become

 familiar to us in the Advent prayers. Isaiah wants God to rip the heavens open.

 Both cry out for an apparently distant, angry God to show up, to save, to restore.

 When we hear Jesus describing the coming of the Son of Man with stars falling

 from heaven, it can sound dire and horrible, not like anything we would ever hope

 for. But when we really look at the suffering of people God loves, we can share

 the hope that God would tear open the heavens and come.

 **Mark 13:24-37**

 Jesus encourages his followers to look forward to the day when he returns in

 power and glory to end all suffering.

 [Jesus said:] 24“In those days, after that suffering,

  the sun will be darkened,

   and the moon will not give its light,

  25and the stars will be falling from heaven,

   and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

 26Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and

 glory. 27Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four

 winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

 28“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and

 puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29So also, when you see

 these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30Truly I

 tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

 31Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

 32“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor

 the Son, but only the Father. 33Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the

 time will come. 34It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and

 puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to

 be on the watch. 35Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the

 master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or

 at dawn, 36or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37And

 what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”