

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

December 2, 2018

First Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Eighty-five years ago in October 1933, Haven Gillespie and J. Fred Coots were riding a New York City subway, on their way to a meeting at a music publisher's office. They had contracted to write a children's Christmas song. As he rode on the subway car, Haven Gillespie quickly jotted down some lyrics and music on the back of an envelope. However, they didn't have much luck getting any music company to record the song.

In the late fall of 1934, radio comedian Eddie Cantor sang the song on his radio show and the audience went wild. The song was recorded and records and sheet music sold quickly and very well. In fact, Haven Gillespie became a millionaire by writing the most popular Christmas song of 1934.¹

Considering today's sermon title, you've probably already figured out the name of that #1 Christmas song from eighty-four years ago.

*You better watch out, you better not cry
Better not pout, I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is comin' to town
He's making a list and checking it twice
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is comin' to town*

*He sees you when you're sleepin'
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake
Oh! You better watch out . . .*

For some reason, that song started playing in my head Wednesday morning as I got dressed. Maybe it's because I was thinking about today's sermon on the first Sunday of Advent. It occurred to me that there were some interesting parallels between "Santa Claus is Comin' To Town" and Jesus talking about "the coming of the Son of Man."

"You better watch out, you better not cry, better not pout, I'm telling you why . . ."

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life . . ."

“Santa Claus is comin’ to town . . .”

“because your redemption is drawing near . . .”

“You better watch out, you better not cry, better not pout, I’m telling you why . . .”

“Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place . . .”

“Santa Claus is comin’ to town . . .”

“that you may have the strength to stand before the Son of Man.”

Just because there are some interesting parallels, that doesn’t mean they’re equivalent. Unfortunately, we too often think of God and/or Jesus as some kind of heavenly Santa Claus, watching every move we make and, based on what we do or don’t do, deciding whether to reward us or punish us. But that kind of “reward” system theology runs contrary to the good news of the gospel of God’s grace, mercy, and love in Christ Jesus our Lord. As the apostle Paul wrote the Roman Christians, “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith . . . But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” (Romans 3:22b-25a; 5:8, 10)

But there does seem to be one helpful parallel between the song and Jesus’ teaching about the coming of the Son of Man. Both have a sense of urgency. Both encourage hearers to be ready. Both exhort folks to watch out.

Jesus says, “Be on guard . . . be alert at all times.” These are imperatives and commands, not just helpful suggestions. These words are what we call “present imperatives,” and are best translated this way: “be on guard, and keep being on guard . . . be alert at all times, and keep being alert at all times.”

“Be on guard, and keep being on guard . . . be alert at all times, and keep being alert at all times,” for what? Jesus says, “The coming of the Son of Man.” In other words, be on guard, be alert for his promised return when all of God’s promises will be fulfilled.

But it’s hard to keep that sense of urgency, day in and day out, year in and year out, much less after 2,000 years. Already toward the end of the first century A.D., scoffers and naysayers were questioning the trustworthiness of Jesus’ promised return. 2 Peter 3:1-10: “This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandments of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’ . . . But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness,

but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief . . .”

And a thief doesn't call you in the afternoon and say, "I just wanted to let you know that I'll be at your house around 1:30 in the morning."

That's not to say Jesus as the Son of Man is like a thief, but that his second Advent, his coming again, will be as unexpected as the coming of a thief in the night. That's why Jesus cautions, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

For some reason, much talk about Christ's return seems intended to scare people into believing. That is very ironic, since the emphasis on Christ's second Advent or second coming is really a clarion call, "Don't live in fear! Instead, live in anticipation of the coming of Christ. What are you afraid of? Put your hope in God's promises and in Christ's power, and face the trials and tribulations of this life with your heads held high."

I was pleasantly surprised and very interested that the Final Jeopardy! category on this past Thursday night's show was "Catholicism," with this answer: "A liturgical year begins on the first Sunday of Advent, which is the Sunday closest to the feast day of this 'first apostle.'" None of the three contestants came up with the correct question. Neither did I, somewhat to my chagrin! Chris wrote, "Who was Paul?" and lost \$11,198 of his \$11,200. The other two, Adriana and Phil, wrote, "Who was Peter?" (which was also my question) That incorrect question lost Phil \$10,401 and Adriana \$7,000 (but she remained the champion). The correct question was, "Who was Andrew?"

What really got my attention, though, was Alex Trebek saying, before revealing the contestants' questions, "His feast day is tomorrow and Advent begins on Sunday." I don't know that I've ever heard Advent referred to on TV. Instead, the airwaves are filled with Christmas commercials and movies and music specials.

I showed the Alternative Sunday School class a YouTube video last week called "Advent in Two Minutes." The video asks, "We all know Christmas right?" and then says, "Christmas is shopping for presents, decorating the tree, singing carols, making gingerbread houses, sending cards, enjoying holiday parties, making a list . . . and checking it twice." Of course, that's not the true message of the video, for it goes on to say, "There's a lot more to it . . . Christmas is Christ entering our world . . . and Advent is expectant waiting, hopeful anticipation, and joyful preparation. . . for God coming into our lives and hearts in all moments, all places, all times. . . past, present, and future . . . commemorating the birth of Jesus, welcoming God into our lives every day, preparing for Christ's second coming. . . Remember Advent isn't about shopping, stressing, planning or buying. . . it's about expecting, waiting, hoping, and praying" The one line that caught my attention in that two minute presentation said, "If you're sick of Christmas by December 25, you haven't done Advent correctly."

The end of the video is a good reflection of what Jesus says to us about waiting and watching: "So, this Advent, add some meaning to your waiting . . . volunteer at a hospital or soup kitchen . . . spend some extra time in prayer . . . be patient with your family . . . count down the days with an Advent calendar . . . speak kindly to strangers . . .

. go to church . . . and share hope with those who need it most while you wait for that special guest.”²

So, when is this all supposed to happen? Well, that’s the \$64,000 question, isn’t it (or adjusted for inflation since 1941, when that phrase originated, the \$1,118,974 question)? Over in Mark’s gospel, when the disciples ask Jesus when all of these things are going to take place, he tells them, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come . . . And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!” (Mark 13:32-33, 37) In Luke’s story, Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree . . .

Do you remember how the Bradford pear trees and the azaleas and other shrubs bloomed and blossomed in the days right after Hurricane Florence? So many people commented on and wondered about this strange phenomenon, so I asked David Johnson of Johnson Nursery to explain what happened. Here is what he emailed me last Tuesday: “One of my favorite courses was ‘The Physiology of Landscape Plants’ taught by J.C. Raulston, who now has an arboretum at NCSU named in his memory. One lesson was how Holly trees are known to produce more berries after extreme winter conditions. His theory, and others, was that producing abundant fruit is an act of survival. Someone, somewhere defined the fitness of a species as the ability to produce offspring. The theory was that a stressed plant would inherently produce more flowers to assure more offspring in case the parent did not survive. My assumption is the trees behaved the same way after the storm.”³

Jesus said, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.” Well, the Bradford pear trees and azaleas led us astray in September, since Fall, not summer, was already near. But Jesus’ words remind us to pay attention to the signs of the times – not so much to hunker down and wait for the end of the world, but to be aware of how the kingdom of God is near, and already at work in our lives and in our world. Because we know that Christ came once and we trust that Christ will come again, right now in this in-between time, we are called to live with hope rather than in fear. As a friend of mine said about the Christian life, especially the message of Advent, “When is a Christian **not** supposed to be ready?”

As I was fixing supper one evening last week, I flipped open the latest issue of *Presbyterians Today* and found an article by Charles Wiley called “Affirmation and Advent: Anticipation of Christ’s return inspires faithful service.” I think he describes very well how Advent puts an important and much needed spin on that very famous and popular Christmas phrase “You’d better watch out!”

“A healthy appreciation for Christ’s return in glory is a powerful call to a life of trust and obedience. This hope can encourage us with confidence that God’s redemptive purpose will not be thwarted.

“Jesus’ own life is set before us as the example of one who participates in God’s coming reign. Jesus’ life reveals that anticipatory living involves active work at unmasking and overcoming evil, being on the side of those in need, working in the ministry of healing, and proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation to all.

“Anticipation of Christ’s return enables us to enter this struggle as vigorously as if it were the eve of the last day. It excites in us an expectation that God continues to redeem the world.

“Let us join in the Advent refrain together: Come, Lord Jesus.”⁴

Let us pray: Loving God, we give you thanks for the season of Advent that reminds us that your love stopped at nothing to save us and claim us as your own. Keep us awake during this season so that we may be able to receive all that your Holy Spirit wants to offer us. Fill us with your power and your grace. Let us leave here a changed people willing and ready to be your light in the world. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “The History of Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” at www.mymerrychristmas.com.

² Advent in 2 Minutes (NEW!) Busted Halo at www.youtube.com.

³ Email conversation with David Johnson, “Stress and Flowers,” November 27, 2018.

⁴ Charles Wiley, “Affirmation and Advent: Anticipation of Christ’s return inspires faithful service,” in *Presbyterians Today*, November/December 2018, p. 7.