

**Isaiah 64:1-9; 2 Peter 3:1-10; Mark 13:24-37    December 3, 2017**

**First Sunday of Advent**

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

## **DON'T SLEEP YOUR LIFE AWAY**

***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.***

The first meeting I attended after I started work here was on Thursday, April 2, 1998 in the Fellowship Hall. Folks were getting together to plan the June Mountain Adventure trip. For a number of years, a diverse group of people would spend several days in West Virginia caving, camping, hiking, canoeing, rappelling, white-water rafting, and enjoying fellowship and worship.

I didn't go on the Mountain Adventure trip that year, but Nancy and I went the next year. We got to the campsite in the afternoon, set up our tents in something of a camp, and settled in for the adventure. This is what we woke up to the next morning —

[I will turn on the cow alarm clock that Newt Carter put outside one of the tents. The alarm consists of a cow bell ringing, a plaintive “moo,” and voice that sounds suspiciously like Arnold Schwarzenegger saying, “Wake up! Don't sleep your life away!”]

Speaking of sleeping your life away, I didn't get much sleep Monday - Thursday, November 13-16, the week before my throat surgery. On Wednesday of that week, I asked Nancy, “Is this week going by quickly or slowly for you?” She said it felt like a normal week and asked me why. I told her, “The days are moving in SUPER slow-motion. Any other week today would already be Friday!” An article in the March 1929 New York Times reported, “Numerous anecdotes are being circulated concerning [Albert] Einstein. He once told a girl secretary when she was bothered by inquisitive interviewers, who wanted to know what relativity really meant, to answer: ‘When you sit with a nice girl for two hours you think it's only a minute, but when you sit on a hot stove for a minute you think it's two hours. That's relativity.’”<sup>1</sup> When it comes to time, it's all relative!

That's certainly true about Advent. I could have said Happy New Year! this morning. It's all relative! Today, the first Sunday of Advent, begins a new church year, which follows the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* describes Advent this way: “Christ has come! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! In Advent, we are living between the first and the second coming of the Lord. The dialectical tension of *maranatha* [alternately translated ‘Come, our Lord!’ or ‘Our Lord has come’] — placing us between memory and hope, past and future — may strengthen our Advent liturgies. Perhaps we need to cling to the ancient cry of *maranatha!* and its paradoxical meanings so we may freely embrace ‘the new thing’ prophesied by Isaiah that God is doing among us right now. The tension and paradox we find in Advent shapes our celebration during the season.”<sup>2</sup>

I maintain the tension and paradox of Advent — our living between “the already but not yet” — not only shapes our celebrations during the season, but that same tension and paradox of past and future can and should shape our lives here in the present.

But have we lost that tension and paradox, that expectation of Christ’s second advent? After all, it’s been almost 2,000 years since Jesus promised, “I’ll be back!” Already at the end of the first century A.D. or the beginning of the second century A.D., scoffers were ridiculing the promise of Christ’s return. We heard their reasoning in today’s epistle lesson: “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!’” We also hear Peter’s response to their cynicism, “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.” (2 Peter 3:4, 9)

Rev. Will Willimon, former dean of Duke Chapel and a professor at the Duke Divinity School, tells a story from early in his ministry when he served a little church in rural Georgia. Listen to him tell the story: “One Saturday we went to a funeral in a little country church not of my denomination. I grew up in a big downtown church. I had never been to a funeral like this one. The casket was open, and the funeral consisted of a sermon by their preacher.

“The preacher pounded on the pulpit and looked over at the casket. He said, ‘It’s too late for Joe. He might have wanted to get his life together. He might have wanted to spend more time with his family. He might have wanted to do that, but he’s dead now. It is too late for him, but it is not too late for you. There is still time for you. You still can decide. You are still alive. It is not too late for you. Today is the day of decision.’

“Then the preacher told how a Greyhound bus had run into a funeral procession once on the way to the cemetery, and that could happen today. He said, ‘You should decide today. Today is the day you get your life together. Too late for old Joe, but it’s not too late for you.’

“I was so angry at that preacher. On the way home, I told my wife, ‘Have you ever seen anything as manipulative and insensitive to that poor family? I found it disgusting.’ She said, ‘I’ve never heard anything like that. It was manipulative. It was disgusting. It was insensitive. Worst of all, it was also true.’”<sup>3</sup>

That funeral preacher’s theology doesn’t exactly line up with Presbyterian, Reformed theology, but there is a kernel of truth. Are you living for today or tomorrow? I think I might have shocked a church member one time when I said getting into heaven is not my main motivation for living. He looked at me and said, “You don’t want to go to heaven?” I replied, “That’s not what I said. Sure, I want to go to heaven. But that’s up to God. My main motivation for living is gratitude for what God has already done in Jesus Christ, the assurance of what God is doing in Jesus Christ, and the hope for what God will do in Jesus Christ.”

But when? When will God’s future happen? After all, it’s been almost 2,000 years! Are we 21<sup>st</sup> century scoffers? Even more dangerous than that, are we just indif-

ferent? When we moved to Roanoke Rapids, NC in September 1988, a Christian bookstore on Roanoke Avenue, the main drag, prominently displayed a book by Edgar C. Whisenant called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Whisenant was a former NASA engineer who predicted Christ's return some time between September 11 and 13, 1988. He said, "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town." He distributed 300,000 copies to ministers across the United States, and sold 4.5 million copies. I guess you know Christ didn't return between September 11 and 13, 1988. A year later, there was another book by Whisenant in the bookstore window called *89 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1989*. He also wrote books predicting the return of Christ in 1993 and 1994, and continued to make predictions until 1997. As one article pointed out, though, "these books did not sell in quantity" and his predictions "gathered little attention."<sup>4</sup>

It has always mystified me why people such as Edgar Whisenant try to predict when Christ will return and why people follow these predictions. When the disciples asked Jesus, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Jesus plainly said, "No one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:4, 32) What, then, are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to live as God's people in this "in-between" time?

Mark's story clearly says "Wake up! Don't sleep your life away!" It might seem strange, on this first Sunday of Advent, to hear a story from the last week of Jesus' life. But that's because Advent not only looks ahead to Christ's return, Advent looks back to what Christ accomplished — and both future and past make a difference for our lives today, in the present.

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus told his disciples, "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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." (Mark 13:35-37)

That timeline — evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn — is the same structure Mark uses to tell the story of some of Jesus' final hours on earth.

\* When it was evening, Jesus ate with his disciples. (14:17)

\* In the middle of the night, Jesus prayed in the garden and Judas betrayed him. (14:32-42)

\* At cockcrow, Peter denied Jesus. (14:72)

\* At dawn, the chief priests held a consultation and turned Jesus over to Pilate. (15:1)

In the midst of all of this drama, Jesus implored his disciples to keep awake! In the garden he said, "Remain here . . . keep awake!" And yet, three times Jesus returned from praying only to find them asleep. "Could you not keep awake one hour?" The disciples slept away their chance to be with Jesus and to see God at work.

As I was preparing this sermon, I read an article called "To Get a Sense of God's Time, Take Off Your Watch." That's such a hard thing for us to do, what with our calendars and watches and clocks and smart-phone reminders. But, as I've said, it's all about time and it's all relative. "Our" time has to do with what's called *chronos* time

(e.g., chronology) — measuring time as moving forward, day after day, hour after hour. “God’s” time has more to do with what is called *kairos* time or, as Richard Rohr calls it, “deep time.” Here’s how the apostle Paul describes what God has done in God’s time (Galatians 4:4-5): “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”

*Kairos* time is the right time, the favorable time, God’s time. It might be out there in the future, one day when Christ returns. But God’s timing was right when he sent Jesus the first time, to redeem us that we might be adopted as God’s children. And if God’s timing was right in the past, we can live with assurance for the future and the present. As an author puts it in an article called “Living a Kairos Life in a Chronos World,” “When Jesus came, it was a fulfillment of promises past, a cosmic collision of the sacred and secular . . . It was a perfect moment. John the Baptist said [Mark 1:15] that ‘time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.’ . . . This godly *kairos* pierced its way into creation at just the right time, slicing through *chronos* with a cry of a baby in a manger . . . *Kairos* moments then — and now — allow us to get a glimpse of the ‘other side.’ We peek around the corner at eternity. We actually glimpse how God works.”<sup>5</sup>

Back in 1999, when people were making predictions about the end of the world, not so much because of Christ’s return but because of the Y2K problem, Eugene March wrote an article for *Presbyterians Today* called “It is enough to be certain that God’s purpose will be accomplished.” After affirming God’s sovereignty and freedom to act and our hope based on God’s trustworthy promises, he asked, “What, then, do Presbyterians believe?” Here is part of his answer: “Presbyterians believe in being ready for the end times while not being fearfully anxious about them. Presbyterians believe that God’s purpose for the world is that loneliness, pain, poverty, sickness, injustice, even death, no longer mar creation. Presbyterians believe God is as concerned with the redemption of society as of individuals and therefore actively seek to demonstrate God’s purpose here and now until it is fully realized in God’s good time.”<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime — in the time between the times — in this already but not yet — [turn on the alarm clock — “Wake up! Don’t sleep your life away!”]

***Let us pray: Lord, we have pulled out the Advent wreath and the Chrismon tree. We have dusted off the Advent hymns we haven’t sung for a year. We have heard the words of the prophet. Yet, in your eyes, these efforts are for nothing without the regular and deep pursuit of justice for all. In our hearts we long to be your people, to carry out your mission, to be lights in the darkness. Lord, awaken us to action. Stir us to courage. Help us prepare a way in the wilderness for your coming, so all may see your light and perceive your coming. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Relativity: A Hot Stove and a Pretty Girl,” at [www.quoteinvestigator.com](http://www.quoteinvestigator.com).

<sup>2</sup>“Advent: Between Memory and Hope,” an excerpt from the *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Geneva Press, 2003, 96) at [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org).

<sup>3</sup>Will Willimon, in his sermon “The Writing on the Wall,” at [www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations).

<sup>4</sup>Personal recollection and from the Wikipedia article “Edgar C. Whisenant” at [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org).

<sup>5</sup>“Living a Kairos Life in a Chronos World,” produced by The High Calling, found at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).

<sup>6</sup>W. Eugene March, “It is enough to be certain that God’s purpose will be accomplished,” January/February 1999 issue of *Presbyterians Today*, in an article “The End of the World” at [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org).