

“Preparing”

Mark 13:24 – 37

Mark 4:30 – 32

Text: “Therefore, keep alert – 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

There is an old Jewish story in the Talmud. A rabbi was considering what questions a Jew would probably have to answer at the last Judgment. What would the universal judge ask? First of all the rabbi thought of the obvious things: were you honest in business? Did you seek wisdom? Did you keep the commandments? And so on.

Finally a question came into his mind which surprised the rabbi himself. It was the question about the Messiah. The universal judge will ask, “Did you prepare for My Messiah?” This question stumped the rabbi. The rabbi knew that the Messiah would only be present when there were signs of the Messiah present. It is a question that left the rabbi stumped. How do you prepare for something that will come when the signs of its coming will be present?

It is the question that we must answer today.

The answer, I think, is being attuned to what the signs of the Messiah are.

It’s not an uncommon question, as we will see later in the advent Season, John the Baptist, while he was imprisoned wanted to know for sure if the Jesus he baptized was the One Who is to come, so he sent his followers to ask Jesus, “are you the one Who John said is going to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered not with a theological explanation, but simply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matthew 11:3–5) Jesus was reciting back to John’s followers the traditional signs of the Messiah. It was another way of asserting the Jewish Messianic belief that until there are signs of the Messiah there is no Messiah.

And those signs are all around us – we have seen the people blinded by the ways of the world gain a vision to help others; we have seen the wounded from wars in the mid-east return with amputated legs, receive medical miracles and walk again; we have seen medical science overcome the ostracism of not only leprosy, but also AIDS and other formally helpless illnesses; and to those who have a deaf ear to the hopes and needs of the world’s poor – someday their ears will be opened; for we do know from our own Mission work in Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, earthquake recovery in Haiti, that the poor indeed, have good news brought to them.

So how are we preparing for the Messiah? Another way of asking this question is what on earth (literally) is it that we are preparing for as we get ready for Christmas?

In my earlier days as pastor, our local clergy association had a weekly television program on the local cable channel. (Cable companies in those days were obligated to provide a certain amount of free air time to community service providers.) One year I was asked to come on and talk about the Season of Advent and how we prepare and what we are preparing for. It was a three person panel. I was quite insistent that all our preparation could be for naught, because of the unexpected nature of God's coming. It seems to me that Jesus' birth was a perfect example of that.

To that end I used as an example the painting by Pieter Bruegel, entitled, *The Numbering of the People at Bethlehem*. The artist's warm, earthy, browns combine with white winter snow to render a December scene in a Flemish village. What we see is an ordinary day in the life of the little town. In the foreground someone butchers and bleeds a squealing pig. Some carpenters are busy erecting the framework of a sled. Children cavort on a frozen pond. A woman busies herself sweeping away the snow from her door. The only thing remotely out of the ordinary is that above a table outside the local inn hangs a Christmas wreath. All in all, it is an ordinary, mundane winter day with nothing, save the wreath, to suggest anything extraordinary, anything beyond the expected.

But then if we look more carefully at the scene, down toward the bottom of the canvas we see, moving toward the census takers at the inn, an inconspicuous, thoroughly ordinary young woman on a little donkey led by a stoop-shouldered, bearded peasant who carries a saw. Here is Mary, with Joseph the carpenter, coming to town to be counted. Nobody pays the slightest attention to them, they are just people immersed in the bustle of everyday life, set in the midst of an indifferent crowd of anonymous men, women and children who play no special part in the story. They are so easily overlooked in the midst of ordinariness.

Old masters like Bruegel "were never wrong". They understood Emmanuel, God with us. They understood our blindness not only to the tragic but also to the triumphant in our midst. The Flemish painter knew how we trudge by the divine in our midst with barely a shrug of the shoulders. "God comes to us only on the stage, in some fantasy drama of the extraordinary," we say. Not here, not in Bethlehem or Chevy Chase or wherever else we make our home. In life, God's Presence goes unnoted as we watch the daily news. And so we continue to wait sitting in the midst of everyday life until something extraordinary breaks in. And lo and behold, it's not extraordinary at all, but it is something out of the ordinary – the birth of a child.

Jesus, our Messiah, came in a very unexpected way. Jesus did not come as Royalty. Jesus was not born in a Palace to the parents of Royalty, nor was Jesus a military leader to restore earthly supremacy of the Israel. Rather Jesus was born in a barn, to young children in the midst of a scandalous birth.

The unexpected – especially for a Messiah. How do we prepare for that?

Actually all of Jesus teachings are sprinkled with this theme experiencing the unexpected. One of my favorites is the parable of the Mustard Seed. You know how it

goes. The mustard seed is allegedly the smallest of all seed, and yet it grows in to a very large tree, big enough for the birds of the air to build their houses in it.

Well, that is an exaggeration. My travels to Israel have revealed that the mustard plant there, as well as here, may grow to 3 maybe 4 feet tall.

Very dense. Yes. And the vine or stem that supports this plant (not tree) is very tenacious; even strong enough for birds to nest in it. Maybe not eagles, but then again, most of us are not eagles. Certainly the mustard plant is large enough for the smaller of common birds.

The interesting thing about this mustard plant – at least to me – is that they were very common in the field out behind my childhood home in Orono, Maine. In summer they weren't much taller than the surrounding grass and hay – but, O, were they dense. I can remember more than once running through the field, playing tag with my friends, when I would trip over the stem of the mustard plant. Field hay and grasses you could run through, but not when there was a mustard plant growing – that would trip you up (or, more appropriately, down).

Advent reminds me of that. As we hurry about trying to keep up with the rest of life and all those seasonal activities, we are likely to trip over the mustard plant that Jesus told us is like the Kingdom of Heaven. Watch, because like a child running through a field, it will trip you when you least expect it. Because Christ's coming into our lives is like that. It is unexpected. And while we are told to watch, we can't plan for it or create it to happen. As unexpected, it will probably happen in the midst of our most ordinary, mundane activities.

We go about our life as a child runs through the field. It's because we don't know where to look for God's presence. We await some grand intervention – when, as in Bruegel's painting, it's right under our nose.

The old master's knew it best.

And the message from Mark's Gospel is to "Watch!", keep hoping – you don't know the day or the hour.

And as we go about our life; like a child running through the field, we better be ready, we may just trip over it.

And if we wait for the extraordinary event of Christ coming into our lives, we will miss God's presence as it works in our lives.

So, . . . not only are we to hope, we are to be prepared for the unexpected. Who knows? It may even happen this morning, when in the midst of busy Greening of the church activities, you might have a conversation with one of your church members and in that the presence and love of God might be become manifest in one of your lives.