

## **"The Best Is Yet to Come"**

Psalm 122; Mark 13:33-37

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 27, 2016 – 1st Sunday in Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Two themes flow through our readings for the beginning of Advent today, that of watchfulness and expectancy. "Watch. Be ready," says Jesus. "Be alert and able to act at any moment."

To almost the entire world the birth of Christ came as a surprise. There were those few, however, who were ready for such a miracle to take place. They were alert to its possibility. The shepherds, the wise men, Mary and Joseph knew that this infant was no ordinary child nor this night just one among many. They were ready and not disappointed.

The season of Advent encourages us to likewise be alert for what may come our way. Not just in a stable, as of old, but wherever Jesus may appear in a world desperately in need of his presence. Something's going to happen all right, but what and when is yet unknown.

Turning to our Old Testament reading this morning, it was frequently used by the Hebrew people in their worship life. Pilgrim bands came to Jerusalem from great distances, often putting themselves at personal risk, because they expected something good to happen as a result of their efforts.

As they gathered for the great annual festivals, they sang hymns of praise and thanksgiving. This song, Psalm 122, was sung as a traveling song, a way of recalling and expressing the joy that being in Jerusalem had for them. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!' Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem."

When the pilgrims came to Jerusalem they ascended to Mount Zion, the high hill on which the temple of God was built. There they went up to worship and to bring thank offerings. The Jews, like other ancient people, thought of the world as being made up of three levels. The earth was the center layer, with the forces of evil down below. But above, at a higher level, was God and the heavenly kingdom.

To ascend, therefore, was something good for then one was moving toward God and heaven. That's why mountains throughout the Bible were given religious significance and symbolism. Jesus most memorable teaching event was the Sermon on the Mount. For his prayer and devotions he also sought the high ground. The Mount of Olives was the setting for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

In the Scriptures there are two mountains very much associated with God: Mount Sinai, where the covenant between God and Israel was sealed, and Mount Zion, the site of the temple where God's presence was thought to reside. The most significant religious experiences the people had were often connected with elevated places.

We may not think in terms of a three-tiered universe today, but there is still something magical and significant about ascending a mountain. There's something special about being high up that gives a person a perspective on the world that, otherwise, they wouldn't have. Mountains seem to have a magnetic attraction.

When we were in Vermont some years back, we went up the ski lift on Mt. Mansfield at Stowe. It surely seemed like a long way up as we rode in that tiny swaying car, although the Swiss who installed the equipment laughed at our audacity to call that place a mountain. The Alps are real mountains, they asserted. But I'll tell you, when you're on top of Mt. Mansfield and look back down at the miniature cars and microscopic houses, it seemed like a long way up to me. And you do get a different perspective. You see more of life from there.

The mountains have their attraction for us despite the fact that we're flatlanders from Central Ohio. Even a good size hill down in Hocking County does something for us when we see so little variation in the topography here. It's thrilling to come around a curve and get the vista on a sprawling valley below.

Age, too, doesn't seem to diminish our attraction to heights. There was a 91 year-old lady from California recently who aspired to climb Mt. Fuji in Japan, and she wasn't going to let her years be an impediment. It took her three days to ascend that 12,000 foot mountain, but she persevered. Toward the peak as the air grew thin, she had to stop and rest every few minutes; but she didn't give up. The achievement of her effort was to stand at the summit and watch the dawn come up. Certainly this was her mountaintop experience, perhaps of all time.

In a way, Advent can also be a mountaintop experience for us, if we remember to watch and to expect. To do so, though, we have to approach this season fresh and new, as if we've never been through this way before.

True, we've lived many Christmases, some of us 70 or even 80. Sometimes we feel that we've seen it all. There's nothing really new that will happen. So we stop looking. This may be our shortcoming. Jesus taught that we must have the eyes of a child to fully see the Kingdom of God. Just think how children approach Christmas. They know that this time is very special and they come to it with awe and wonder. They're ready to find something new and unexpected around every corner.

Today I want to tell you a story. Jack Schaefer writes about a very ordinary person in his little tale *Stubby Pringle's Christmas*. Now Stubby is a tough cowhand who has largely taken care of himself since he was orphaned at 13. He's basically a no-nonsense kind of guy, but tonight is Christmas Eve and there's a dance in town. So he loads his saddlebags with chocolates and fabrics, presents for the young ladies he will hopefully be able to dance with. He knows that his looks are not his strong point, so he brings these gifts as a little incentive if needed.

On his way to town Stubby comes across a woman homesteader out chopping wood in the cold. It's easy to see that she's not getting far with her strenuous work. Stubby reins his horse to a stop and greets her. She tells him that her husband is very sick and that she is doing the best she can to keep the fire going. Stubby's not particularly a sentimental kind of guy, but he senses her desperate situation. So he gets down from his stead and offers to help.

When he carries the firewood into her cabin, he sees her sick husband and her two sleeping children. He asks where their Christmas tree is. She replies that they have none. So Stubby goes out until he finds a pine tree, cuts it down, and brings it back to the house. She has no decorations, so he and the woman make simple things out of ribbons and twine to hang on the tree.

Stubby then asks her about gifts to put under the tree, but she tells him they're too poor to afford them. He stops for a moment, then remembers the items that he's packed in his saddlebags. They were put in there for a definite purpose; nonetheless, he goes out and brings them into the cabin. He gives the material to the woman and her eyes brighten. She exclaims excitedly that she can quickly stitch this into a simple dress for her daughter. While she does this, Stubby takes a small piece of wood from next to the fireplace and proceeds to carve it into a tiny horse for the boy. He's good with a knife.

By the time the children's presents are completed, the woman falls asleep in her chair, totally exhausted from her burdens. On his way out of the cabin, Stubby carefully places the chocolates on the woman's lap, a present for her. On the table he leaves the 7-blade knife he used for whittling as a gift for her ailing husband. Then he closes the door quietly behind him.

His horse is still waiting patiently for him, but instead of heading for town he turns the animal in the direction from where they've come. It's too late for the dance now, much too late. It's close to dawn on Christmas Day.

Stubby is very tired when he reaches the ranch. It's all he can do to slip into his bunk. Another cowhand wakes up with his arrival and asks sleepily, "Was it worth all that ridin' to the dance?" "Why sure," said Stubby, "I had me a right good time."

I think this simple story captures a bit of the true meaning of Advent. Stubby Pringle sets out for that dance anticipating something good and fully expecting it to happen. He didn't know what it would be and, in fact, it wasn't anything like he imagined. Yet, when the occasion presented itself, he was ready to respond. He saw what he could just as easily pass by.

So here was a man who gave of himself, of what little he had, to bring a few smiles and some joy of living to those he found along the way. He would have said that it wasn't anything special, just what seemed right, though we can guess that many a person might not have stopped | on such a special night.

Perhaps that story reminds us of another who also gave of himself so that the world might find peace and joy and meaning. This sacrifice would turn out to be our salvation. Those present at the time of his birth sensed something momentous was happening, though only years later would it be fully understood.

Like going up a mountain, as we progress through Advent we have the opportunity to see who we are and where we are a little better each day. We get more sight and insight the farther we go, but only if we keep our eyes fully open.

This year doesn't have to be a warmed-over holiday period. It can be new and exciting and take us to strange and wonderful places, even if we never leave home. The key words are *watch* and *expect*. Do both faithfully this year and you may discover Christ among us, perhaps in the most unexpected of places, and learn anew that the greatest gift of receiving is the gift of giving.

Come, let's take the journey together. It begins today. The best is yet to come.