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Sermon #10. Advent #1. CLCC. Mark 13:24-33

12.3.2017

“In Those Days”

Mark 13:24-33

*24 ‘But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,*

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then 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. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken

place. ³¹ Heaven 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. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

[PRAY]

One of my very favorite holiday traditions is the exchanging of Christmas cards. It’s not a very old tradition, beginning in Britain in the 1840’s - in America by the 1870’s. But I guess in America it doesn’t take much time to establish a tradition. We aren’t that old. At least the country that was made of those that descend from the European settlers of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

My family came into this land in the late 19th century. Englishmen and Norwegians and Germans, primarily. My Norwegian family line, 4 or 5 generations back, settled for some time in South Dakota - where many other Norwegians did the same. We don’t have particular stories of my ancestors driving the Lakota off the land which had been in their care for a thousand years, but I am sure we did. We *do* have stories that indicate my family was a pretty rough crew, the family of my great-grandmother Peggy.

My Great-grandma Peggy and I shared a birthday. Both born March 31st. I always thought that was special. We would sometimes go visit her and my great-grandpa Bill, and what I remember best is that you had to bring your own nickels and dimes if you wanted to play poker with the grown-ups.

Grandma Peggy and I had a deal we made when I was pretty young, sitting at one of those family poker tables. Since we had the same birthday, she said she would take me to the casino herself when I turned 21. She liked the nickel slots and poker machines the best. We spoke of this agreement as often as we saw each other. She wouldn't let me forget it. She was as sharp as a tack until the day she died. She never lost her mind. I was 20 years old when she passed.

I could always count on a Christmas card from great-grandma Peggy...with \$5 in it. For 20 years, a card with 5 bucks. A quintessential example of the declining purchase power of a fixed income. But, I suppose it is cards like that which explain my affection for them. Watching your friend's children grow up, year by year. Every few years having to find new spots to put the cards around the house because your list keeps growing. The cards written by hand in a shaky kind-of script from church members you once knew. Every once in a while, having to call in help to read some of the words - my grandfather on the Bradley side is particularly challenging. (He listens to these sermons online - I'm going to be in some trouble.)

I just really like cards, the physical act of writing a note, or just even signing my name. Licking the envelope, and watching the "ready to send" stack grow. Christmas cards might only have been a thing for 150 years or so, but writing a heartfelt note to loved one on the occasion of celebrating Christ is as old as scripture itself. The majority of the New Testament are letters. Most of them love letters. In a way, Christmas cards.

So, I thought I might write the Church a Christmas card, this first week of Advent. I surely can't send each and every one of you a family Christmas card - that would set a dangerous precedent as we really start to grow in coming years. I'll have to tithe just in Christmas cards!

So instead, I'll just give you this little love epistle now - if you don't mind.

Dear Church,

Wow, it's been quite a year! Can you believe all that has happened? It feels like yesterday I was here in the sticky heat of summer, meeting secretly ...with only 25 or 30 of you at the pavilion. And now the mornings require scraping frost from my windshield as many mornings as it doesn't. It's a new life church. Do you believe in new life?

It has also at the same time been a hard year outside of our small-town life. It seems the theme of the last year has been uncertainty and worry. They have started killing church folks, as well as school children. Can you even imagine? Good Lord. Driving trucks into peaceful protests. Anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic activity on the rise. Unconstitutional immigration laws passed. And just yesterday, a full out financial assault on the middle class in this country. Hate has been emboldened this year Church, greed has been made our top civic value, and so it gets hard to be fully into the Christmas spirit when we have had a year in the world like we have had. Loveless,

bitter, and unrelentingly unkind. I wouldn't be surprised if "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven" sometime soon.

But, if we stay in that place forever, we can't be *Church*. If we live in the bitter exchange of talking points on Facebook, we can't be Church. So instead, we carry on towards God's abundance. As Brueggemann puts it in today's devotional reading, "Advent is preparation for the *demands of newness* that will break the tired patterns of fear in our lives." I know you can find the hope in this season Church, this season of Advent. This season of preparation and wonder.

I know you can because every Thursday around lunchtime, there is a line of people standing and waiting for the Clothes Closet to open her doors wide open. [SPACE] A store without money. *That* is church.

I know you can because we gather amongst ourselves, and some generous friends, over 180 coats for the children living at Tower Road. May God have mercy on all our souls for the conditions those children and their families endure at Tower Road. That bus is coming soon, dear children of God.

I know you can find the hope of this season because you have sent missionaries to Kenya, and love gifts to Week of Compassion for hurricane relief. We will soon be supporting Disciples Women with the blanket drive. We are investing such good time and energy and love in BeNuts. Meeting folks at the Light up Blue Ridge event, handing out spicy ghost pepper peanuts has been one of the real highlights of my time here. Our people are coming together to talk about our budget, and our bylaws, and our children/youth programing, and our practices of gratitude, and our online presence, and our worship experiences...and much more. In all of this service you provide through your relationship with Cherry Log Christian Church, you embody hope. You live the gospel.

And where better than a Christmas Card letter to tell you how much of a gift you are to me, to this community, and to each other? You, dear sweet church, are a gift.

I don't want to go on and on like your rambling great aunt Hilda's Christmas manifesto, but I do want to give you a gift, of sort. Again, the precedent it would set to get you each a gift...down the road when we are bursting at the seams with eager and hungry souls seeking the sweet satisfaction of the gospel - well, you know...I'm only a pastor.

So, my gift is to give you all a prayer, to share with you what my prayer would be for your abundance.

In your abundance, you are patient. You live closer and closer to a moment by moment existence. You see wonder and you heed your life to it. You are open to beauty surprising you. You allow things to evolve, instead of anticipating - you ponder first. You are an abundantly patient Church.

My prayer for you is for a radical presence, reverent presence with the Spirit and the self.

In your abundance, you mentor wisely. You give of your talents, and support those who share of their gifts and abilities. You learn as much as you teach, and teach as much as you learn. You deepen your faith by understanding the human condition, with empathy and care. You are wise enough to know the power of good questions - and faithful enough to find the transformation that comes from heartfelt responses. You teach each other how to heal. You are abundantly wise mentors.

My prayer for you is that you might find the gentleness required to change your own heart.

In your abundance, you stand up - and you are seen. You Church, are not just a small group of sojourners in the mountains of northern Georgia. You are Cherry Log Christian Church. Cherry Log speaks the Word, in great abundance. Always has, always will. You find the will and the ways to speak a Word of the Lord into the spaces which have such a desperate need for something Holy. You hold sacred space that has the spiritual force of healing through your reverent prayer and spiritual care. You are a gathering of saints bringing an offering of your own selves. A true *community* of faith. And yet, as you stand on ancient principles of a covenantal people, your members span the country in a digital age. Any computer can find your services. Any Facebook feed can see quotes from your wise members and leaders. You move the conversation with your gentleness. Your capacity to be the hands and feet of Christ grows as more and more people can authentically plug-in to your Spirit-led witness to the gospel.

My prayer for you is that you see far-off horizons, and plan for a long and wild ride walking the Way of Jesus.

And finally, Church, in your abundance you leave a legacy. You are made up of so many stories church. Ancient ones, Holy ones, wondrous ones, and horrific ones. Stories of loss and pain, hope and gain, benevolence and grace, of time and space. Your own life a witness to creation at play. You are storytellers church. You let the gospel roll off your lips like milk & honey. The tales of life and love and hope and grace you spin are as sweet great-grandma Peggy's rhubarb pie.

In your wisdom church, you know there is nothing more powerful in winning lives to Christ than a good story told well. The gospel itself is such a back-alley whisper, a heresy of what was - looking beyond a dark horizon to the power of God's own light. Your story is told and re-told. It is a tale of inspiration and diligence and wonder of the Holy Spirit. Yours is a legacy well set in the story of the Church.

My prayer for you church is that you remember you have been anointed as messengers of the light. Evangelists, harbingers, Angels of the Word. You church. You.

Well, I have taken up too much time for a Christmas letter. I hope everyone can welcome the coming Christmas celebrations with reverence and wonder and with a great hope in what God is doing next. We can't know the timing, that is for God to know. But we can believe in the coming abundance - that is, in fact, our call. That is what it means to walk in faith. You church, you are truly poised for abundance.

With great love from a grateful pastor,

Adam

This has been the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, as it was and is and will be, and for that gospel, thanks be to God.