

“The Little Music Ball”

Mark 13:24-37; I Corinthians 1:3-9

The First Sunday in Advent, November 30, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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I hope all of you had a wonderful Thanksgiving. We did. I suggested to my wife Carol that with our holiday we should start writing Christmas cards. She said she didn't think so. I said, “Why not?” She replied “Because we don't have any yet.” On the other hand, some of you may be like the late Erma Bombeck who boasted *“I bought my Christmas cards last January. I just can't find them.”*

Most years, like this year, Thanksgiving weekend ends with the first Sunday in Advent. If you aren't ready to hear about Christmas yet, don't worry. Christmas Day is only three and a half weeks away. 24 days, thirteen hours and 30 minutes. *Plenty of time.* So don't worry.

In fact, I have a way to diminish worry and make this a Christmas your spouse or partner will never forget. Charge everything. On *their* credit card.

But I mentioned Advent. While the world is exhorting us to the sales in the days after Thanksgiving, the church calendar call us to Advent preparation. The word “Advent” comes from the Latin, *“adventus,”* “to come.”

There is tension in this. Never mind that Christmas is coming, though there is nothing wrong with this, nor of preparing for it. You will not find an Ebenezer Scrooge “humbug!” message from me this morning, nor some mournful cry about commercialism. I enjoy a present as much as the next person.

It is just that this is not the coming of which Advent speaks. Advent rather speaks of the coming of the birth of Christ and of Christ's return in glory. These themes are expressed in today's liturgy, songs and scripture.

Yet, frankly, they are foreign to most of us. Never mind that most of us pray regularly *“Thy Kingdom come”* with the knowledge that it is Jesus’ coming that ushers in the Kingdom. Never mind that similar faithfulness causes us to affirm, in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, *“He shall come again to judge the quick—that is, the living—and the dead.”* We simply do not think or worry so much about Jesus’ return.

This is a curious thing, because the early church surely did. Christians of every age believe that the Messiah, awaited by devout Jews, came in Jesus of Nazareth. After his death and resurrection the first Christians clung closely to Jesus’ promises that he would return to fully usher in the Kingdom of God. Today’s readings refer to that hope, using phrases like “that day” (Mark 13:32) and “the day” (I Cor. 1:8). In fact, these Christians expected the Kingdom’s return in their lifetime, as expressed in Mark 13:30: *“this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place”* and by St. Paul in other writings.

A colleague once said, *“Well, that’s the problem. The Kingdom didn’t come in their lifetime; the expectation was wrong and abandoned for good reason.”* Perhaps. But I have three problems with that way of thinking. First, God’s ways are not our ways nor God’s time our time. Paraphrasing Psalm 90:4, Isaac Watts wrote nearly three centuries ago:
*“A thousand ages, in Thy sight, are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night, before the rising sun.”*

This reminds me: I got an e-mail this week—I am not making this up—for which the subject line was “Important Message from God.” I trusted my spam filter more than the possibility that it was God so I deleted it. (Looking up) I hope that was okay. I’ve actually been in regular communication with God lately with the lottery jackpot going up. I said “God, ‘a thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone?’ Seriously, what is a million years to you?” And God replied, “A million years is like a second.” So then I asked “God, how much is a million dollars to you?” and God replied, “A million dollars is like a penny.” So I said, “God, can I have a penny?” And God replied, “Just a second.” God’s time is not our time. We frustrate ourselves to think differently.

The second problem I have with giving up the hope of Christ's return is the prayer Jesus taught us: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Without the One whose return will fully usher in the Kingdom, it seems to me that prayer is little more than wishful thinking; in which case, why bother?

The third problem I have with giving up hope of Christ's Kingdom is that we all have a Kingdom encounter at our deaths. The Kingdom comes to us as individuals even if not to nations. Are we ready?

By now someone may have wondered "What does this have to do with the message title "The Little Music Ball." Years ago we had this music ball in our living room. It played "Silent Night." Most of you know the story of Silent Night. It was 1818. Austria was recovering from war; there was no money; the church was in disrepair and its organ unplayable. The musician, Franz Gruber, wrote a simple tune that could be played on a guitar and the priest, Joseph Mohr, wrote words that evoke tranquility wherever they are heard.

This little music ball hung from a lamp in our living room each Christmas. One year we forgot to remove it. It hung there, month after month, silent until someone pulled it in the middle of March or July or October and Christmas visited us again. It reminded us that the hope that is the essence of this season is all around us and always around us.

This is why today's Gospel ends as it does. Depending on the translation it says "Keep awake." "Watch." "Stay alert." We never know exactly how or where or even why the holy God will break in on us, on our frenzied preoccupation with human concerns. God's breaking in is not to distract us from our human concerns, but to be one with us in them. What else did our opening hymn mean? "O come, O come, Emmanuel." Emmanu-el: "God with us." God-with-us. Amazing.

Because it is amazing, there is something I want you to do. Actually, three things. Actually, any one of the three things. Unlike Dr. Seuss, who had "Thing 1" and "Thing 2," I also have "Thing 3." Here they are:

Thing 1: do what the Gospel says. Keep awake. Stay alert. Watch. Look for God in the ordinary things. A church I know share “God-sightings.” What about praying for each family from whom you receive a Christmas card? Look for the hope that comes when we see God at work.

Thing 2: believe what Paul says at the end of today’s epistle: “God is faithful.” Put the accent wherever God leads you to place it today. On the Name above every Name: *God* is faithful. On action: God *is* faithful. On identity: God is *faithful*.

Thing 3: invite someone without a church home to join you here this Christmas. Not just on Christmas Eve, for some of us are in other churches that night, but now, in these coming Sundays. Who do you know, without a church home, who might be blessed by our faith community?

Entertain these ways of responding to Jesus as you would entertain your best friend at Christmas. For who else is it, indeed, who comes in that silent night? Amen.