

“God-with-us, God-for-us, God never distant”

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First Presbyterian Church, Knoxville
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On Good Friday in 1300, Dante Alighieri entered what he called “the Forest of Error,” a dark, ominous place that symbolized the sinfulness of the world. He described entering this forest as losing his way:

MIDWAY upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me_ how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

I cannot well repeat how there I entered,
So full was I of slumber at the moment
In which I had abandoned the true way.

At the top of a hill in the distance, he saw a light, but when he attempted to climb toward it, his way was blocked. Puzzled, and uncertain what else to do, Dante was stymied. But then the spirit of the Roman poet Virgil appeared and offered to escort him out of the Forest of Error by another route. A route that led through Hell. Posted above the entrance to hell, he read these words:

Through me the way is to the city dolent;
Through me the way is to eternal dole;
Through me the way among the people lost.

Before me there were no created things,
Only eterne, and I eternal last.
All hope abandon, ye who enter in!

The setting for Mark chapter 13 begins with Jesus predicting the destruction of the Temple, in response to his disciples’ words of admiration for the building as they leave it for what will be the last time. “Look, Teacher!” they say, “What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” He replies, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

Then we are told, as they sat on the Mount of Olives, with the Temple in view, that Peter, James, and John asked Jesus privately about his condemnation of

the Temple. From verse 5 until the end of the chapter is an extended discourse by Jesus which links the destruction of the Temple with the end of all things!

First there are a series of warnings against deceptive signs of the end-times: the appearance of deceivers, wars, and upheavals of nature; the persecution of Jesus' disciples; the appearance of the desolating sacrilege and false messiahs. Jesus tells them to "watch out" and to "be on guard" and "not to be led astray."

The second part of this discourse is our Gospel lection for today. As you heard, it includes parables and sayings on "watchfulness" and on "the absent master." Lamar Williamson comments, "The gist of this section is that the end is in fact coming, when the son of man comes. The event is certain, but the time is unknown. The appropriate stance for disciples, therefore, is to watch." (Interpretation, Mark, p.237)

To watch, not to abandon hope. But to watch. To wait.

This isn't at all like the scene in Peter Jackson's movie *The Return of the King* where Elrond gives Aragorn a legendary sword and says, "The man who can wield the power of this sword can summon to him an army more deadly than any that walks this earth. Put aside the ranger. Become who you were born to be." Elrond then says, "I give hope to the World of Men." Daunted by what lies before him, Aragorn replies, "I keep no hope for myself."

March 13 isn't at all like that. Watch. Wait. All is not lost, but do not be found sleeping.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. But our Gospel reading is about the Second Coming of the Lord, not the first. Lawrence Stookey explains what's going on:

The First Sunday of Advent is regarded in the Western Church as the beginning of the liturgical year. But Advent is first of all about the end of time. Because the term itself means "coming" or "arrival," and because it precedes Christmas, many have misunderstood Advent to be exclusively a time to get ready to celebrate the coming of a child at Bethlehem.... The beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things. For "end" means not only the "end of time," but the central purpose or goal of creation. We are not aimlessly wandering in a wilderness, even though we are tempted to think so. Rather, history is headed somewhere by direction from God. It is necessary that the liturgical year begin with this focus on a central, holy intention; for otherwise the story of Jesus, which is about to be rehearsed from conception and birth to death and resurrection, may seem less than it is: the deliberate fulfilling of divine purpose, worked out through historical process. (Calendar, p. 121)

You might say Advent means we have **hope times two**: hope because history is moving toward its fulfillment as God wills, and hope because God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.

Our hope in the Second Coming answers our anguish over the future. Let's be honest: we know that time is both friend and thief. As friend, it allots to each of us the years that make up our life story. As thief, it is ever eroding, ever passing, ever forgetting. Issac Watts was right: "Time, like an ever-rolling stream, Soon bears us all away."

As Christians our hope is that though we do not have the future in our own hands, we believe that God has a future and has promised that we will be a part of that future. **God comforts our anxiety over time by offering us eternity.**

Our hope in the child born in Bethlehem answers a different type of anguish. Not worry about the future, but the seeming senselessness and purposelessness of being human. You see, if God became man and took on our weakness, our pain, even our death, these things can no longer be the woeful embarrassments we have always conceived them to be, for they are now shot through with his grace and elevated by his willing participation in them. If God became man, lived an earthly life as all of us do—sweated, slept, loved, feared, bled, died—but also rose and returned to Heaven, the same route has been opened to all of us, to all "mortal flesh," now impregnated with divinity. (see Thomas Cahill's [Mysteries of the Middle Ages](#) for a more complete treatment of this subject)

The birth of Jesus means that God turned toward us, became one of us, is compassionate beyond all imagining, willing to live, suffer, and die for each of us, so compassionate that no one is excluded, not even the most stupid, the most craven, the most outrageous, the most corrupt. If God took on human flesh no one is negligible. It means that God is with us, God is for us, God is never distant! **God comforts our anxiety over time by offering us eternity, but God comforts our anxiety over our humanness by offering us Himself in Jesus Christ.**

Christians in the Middle Ages sang a song of unknown origin expressing their delight and fascination with the hope brought by the birth of Jesus. It was called *Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day* and was sung on Christmas Eve:

In a manger laid and wrapped I was

So very poor, this was my chance,
Betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass,
To call my true love to my dance.

It describes salvation as a dance:

Then up to heaven I did ascend,
Where now I dwell in sure substance
On the right hand of God, that man
May come unto the general dance.

There is a local tie to a more modern bit of reflection on the person of Jesus, on what it meant for him to be, literally, God among us, and on what it might have meant to his mother.

Here in Knoxville in the mid-Forties, Grady and Hazel Cole were hired by Lowell Blanchard to appear on the Tennessee Barn Dance, a daily program heard on WNOX on Gay Street. Surely the Coles saw our church, walked by our cemetery, maybe even worshiped here.

Grady Cole is best remembered because he took a song written by Addison Crabtre that he reworked into something quite different. *The Tramp on the Street* was first recorded in Atlanta in 1939 and has been since recorded by more than 20 other artists, a diverse group that includes Molly O'Day, Joan Baez, and Hank Williams. Grady wrote:

Jesus, He died on Calvary's tree
Shed His life's blood for you and for me
They pierced His sides, His hands and His feet
And they left Him to die like a tramp on the street.

He was Mary's own darlin', he was God's chosen Son
Once He was fair and once He was young
Mary, she rocked Him, her darlin' to sleep
But they left Him to die like a tramp on the street.

Shirley Guthrie said, "...the birth stories of Jesus emphasize the Christian belief that "God with us" is not just a beautiful idea or an abstract theological truth.... It happened at a particular time, in a particular place, in connection with a particular mother.... The Christmas story is anything but the sentimental, harmless, once-a-year occasion for a "Christmas spirit" that lasts only a few days before we return to the "facts" of the "real world." Christmas is the story of a radical invasion of God into the kind of real world where we live all year long—a world where there is political unrest and injustice, poverty, hatred, jealousy, and both the fear and longing that things could be different." (Christian Doctrine)

What **if** God was one of us? “Physically and intellectually and emotionally and spiritually Jesus lived the same life we all live. He hurt. He played. He had to learn. He could be afraid as well as self-confident. He could feel lonely and deserted.” **He knew the temptation to abandon hope.**

One of Us is a song written by Eric Bazilian and was recorded by Joan Osborne in 1995. It continues the tradition of the world’s fascination with the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, and what it means. I’ve asked Don Cassell, Robyn McAdoo, Chris McAdoo, and Chris Vogado to lead our response to the sermon by singing “One of Us.”