

Binkley Baptist Church

“Advent Sign-age: Hope”

Advent I

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

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II Corinthians 9: 6-15

I hope you had a meaningful and blessed Thanksgiving and that you didn't need to play Adele's new album to break up family food fights or heated arguments around your table.

Well the signs are all around us: Black Friday's sales, Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday, Bankruptcy Wednesday. Every store you drive by and every place send you the message—Culturemas is now 26 days away. At church however we mark time differently. Advent, from the Latin word “adventus” which means coming or arrival is the time the church needs to prepare for the coming of Christ. These four weeks find the church leaning forward with expectation and anticipation. Closely related is the word “adventure” defined as “an undertaking involving risk, unforeseeable danger or unexpected excitement.” Something is about to happen. Get ready for its arrival.

This first Sunday of Advent is called the beginning of the Christian liturgical year. The Christian calendar starts today, not January 1. Interestingly, the first Sunday of Advent always concerns itself with eschatology or last things. We begin with the end in mind, said Stephen Covey. This first Sunday always reminds us that how we envision the future greatly shapes how we live in the present. How we live and for what we hope says a lot about who we are and who we are becoming. It is Advent time. Binkley Baptists, you are an advent people, disciples on advent-ure, on a hopeful journey together.

Now I doubt seriously anyone here woke up and said, “I can't wait to hear a second coming of Christ sermon today.” No one—I suspect—thought “I'd appreciate a good apocalypse with my advent this morning.” But did you hear and imagine those images I just read:

Roaring of the seas and waves, people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world (anyone have that on their Christmas card?), and there will signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations.

There's no sentimental nativity set in today's gospel scene. And you may have some difficulty finding hope—not only in the texts but in the news. If someone asked you—“do you believe we're living in the end times?” How would you answer? If you and your people were oppressed, suffered cruelty, could not escape persecution in this life, how might you go about offering...hope? In troubled times, such as the present one, there's always an upsurge in “apocalyptic pronouncements.” Apocalyptic language/literature such as we have in Jesus' discourse today is strange, frightening, more than a little embarrassing to our post-modern scientific minds, yet it is a dramatic witness to the tenacity of faith and hope among the people of God. (Craddock, Luke, pg. 243.)

“Amid painful and prolonged suffering when there can be seen on the horizon of predictable history no relief in sight from disaster, faith turns its face toward heaven not only for a revelation of God's will but also for a vision of the end of the present misery and the beginning of the age to come.” (Craddock, pg.243).

This genre of the biblical literature portraying the end of the world and of human history is filled with symbols, visions, and signs. So much of the New Testament includes this command: be ready, be alert, and pay attention to signs.

Molly Marshall, president at CBTS in Kansas City, has a sign on her door: “Jesus is Coming Soon: Look Busy.” In our advent waiting how are we to interpret signs of the times? Can we take seriously a call to, what Wendell Berry describes as, “fire our imaginations with hope.” Can we move in directions of hope learning how to orient our lives with patience and the continued practices of our faith? Amidst all the rancor, strife, hatred, and anger fueled by those who profit from ginning up our fears, and from real world terrorism both abroad and home—should we despair, throw our hands up/give up, bunker-down and barricade ourselves

The text speaks to cosmic chaos and given so many tumultuous events I can understand why so many have a pre-occupation with “last-things.” But I’m not taken eschatomania, in fact I may be an eschatophobe. I’ve not read one word from those popular books a decade ago, *Left Behind*.

Signs are important.

Signs give us directions, indicate locations, and signs explain and describe.

Now signs can welcome (ours at Willow and Fordham is inviting: “All Are Welcome”) and signs can be like the new one in Harris County Georgia. The sheriff there paid for the sign which says, “Welcome to Harris County Georgia” but adds “Warning: Harris County is politically incorrect. We say, Merry Christmas, God Bless America and In God We Trust. We salute our troops and our flag. If this offends you...LEAVE!” God as national mascot, you know. Inviting sign? I think not.

The sheriff said he did this to “stir people’s belief and patriotism.” “It’s time for the silent majority to stand up for our beliefs and not be ashamed.” His sign leaves me more shaken than stirred. That sign sends a message alright. A good sign can convey a lot in one passing glance. Years ago in rural Indiana I saw on a side of a Quaker church: “Strangers Expected.” I like that.

C.S. Lewis in [The Silver Chair](#) from the *Chronicles of Narnia* has Aslan saying:

“First, remember, remember, and remember the signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the signs.”

“And secondly, I give you a warning—here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear but as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.”

Novelist Barbara Kingsolver’s book essays, “*Small Wonders*” speaks to the power of hope. She takes a look at the wars, disasters, and political violence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she, in essence, writes a modern translation of Luke’s little apocalypse. She chronicles the distortion of national patriotism that produces the sign in Harris Co. Georgia, the barbarity of war and capital punishment. But she ends with soaring words of hope, a looking forward to the future that affects how we live in the present. Rather than feeling hopeless she suggests that we bang on the door of hope and refuse to let anyone suggest that no one is home. “What I find is this: conquering my own despair by doing what little I can...small changes, small wonders. These are the currency of my

endurance and my life. It is a workable economy." No Black Friday sales are necessary to make that economy flourish.

As Nelson Mandela said: Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up. Then we become the signs that change is coming. We don't sit idly by and wait we work for justice and try to give hope to those forgotten and despised.

The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote a book entitled "Theology of Hope." He said he wrote it in an attempt to present the Christian gospel as hope no longer as an "opium of the beyond" but rather as the divine power that makes us alive in the world. Moltmann's story of conversion is an interesting one that he writes about in his autobiography "A Broad Place." Moltmann was born in April 1926 and grew up northeast of Hamburg, Germany. As a boy he was sucked into the Hitler Youth Movement. By Feb. 1942 he was conscripted into an auxiliary of the German air force. Then in 1944 at age 18 he was called up for active military duty and assigned to the heavy weapons company of an infantry battalion. Moltmann saw action---some of it nearly fatal for him---and wound up as a prisoner of war in Scotland. He writes: "The Scottish overseers and their families were the first who came to meet us, their former enemies, with hospitality that profoundly shamed us." Moltmann, who had grown up outside the church, was drawn to faith in the midst of that dark time while a POW. It was a terrible darkness, the pit of the Nazi scourge and of war, but from it he as one emerged a man committed to the Christian gospel and who would powerfully articulate a theology of...HOPE. He passed through the valley of hopelessness---and worse, meaninglessness---and emerged as a voice of hope, an advocate of the future.

Will Willimon once asked an African American pastor why black church services lasted so long—or so much longer than white services. The pastor said that his people spend the week being bombarded with news of unemployment in their community, violence in their streets, and poverty among their families. But when Sunday rolls around he's privileged to proclaim a different message: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into marvelous light!" The black minister said to Willimon: "Now in our church it may take 2 or 3 three hours for us to remember who we are. How long do you need?" We need at least four weeks, don't we?

Jesus is coming soon. But don't just look busy---get busy. Not with Christmas shopping but get busy in this advent-ure of following Jesus into the streets, into neighborhoods, and into the world. How we envision the future shapes how we live in the present. So become a sign of hope. Today. Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.