



WE'RE EXPECTING
Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

I want to share some exciting news with you today – Mary and I are **expecting!** Some of you are probably smiling and saying, “I didn’t know the ole boy still had it in him.” Some you are probably thinking “Poor Mary – at her age. She is a nurse – she should know about such things.” Well, Mary and I are expecting – we are expecting Mary’s mother – my favorite Mother-in-law – to come and stay with us for an expanded period of time – until she resettles in Minnesota.

Without a sense of expectation – there can be no proper preparation. We prepare during advent – but for what?¹

Waiting and preparing are two different responses. I remember vividly the births of our two children – Jennifer and John. I remember all the preparations as we expectantly waited for their arrival. We could see the signs of growth in Mary’s body – but the date circled on the calendar was far away. The births of our two children were just too much for me. All that crying – carrying on – and that was just me never-the-less what my dear bride was feeling. Just the thought that the baby could break into our lives at any moment was exciting and exhausting. Once the baby came – life would never be the same again.

One of the essential beliefs of our Christian faith is the second or final coming of Jesus Christ. The fact that God in Christ will come again is absolutely certain. What is uncertain is the when and how. It is that certainty which motivates us to prepare the way in our expectation.² Advent is about expectations filled with and fueled by hope – not despair. We live now in the kingdom already present – but not yet fully realized.

We pray as instructed by Jesus – “Thy kingdom come – Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” When we pray “Thy kingdom come” – we identify and offer ourselves as participants in this world in which God rules in love and salvation. Implicit in this petition is the command “**my kingdom go . . .**” God has never abdicated his throne. We share in God’s kingdom – but it is his kingdom and his rule.³

As you and I gather in this sanctuary today we know there is much in our world in open rebellion against the kingdom of God.⁴ We see the human alienation and sinfulness that emerges from our alienation from God. From the church house all the way to Capitol Hill – we see what happens with our schemes for self-improvement.

We know that apart from the authority of God's word – and the direct intervention of God – we are totally lost and in despair.

Today's lesson from **Mark 13** is what we call 'apocalyptic language.' As Eugene Peterson shares, "Apocalyptic language is extreme language. It is attention-getting language. It is particularly useful in waking up people who are sleep-walking through this world of wonder. It is language of urgency."⁵

In our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah, the prophet is crying out as Eugene Peterson translates in **THE MESSAGE BIBLE** in **verse 1**, "Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend. Make the mountains shudder at your presence."

Then in **verse 4**,
"Since before time began
No one has ever imagined,
No ear heard, no eye seen,
A God like you
Who works for those who wait for him."⁶

The spiritual dilemma they face is the fact they have stopped expecting – stopped attending to the purposes and plans of God. The people of God had forgotten God – and now realized the price they had paid for such apathy and personal kingdom building. The people are now turning back to God – and now the prophet Isaiah represents the nation before God – for God to act again for his people. Yes, "if we have faith in God's willingness to act on our behalf – it's possible to wait for him to act. And the waiting is not a waiting of anxiety – but one of certainty. God is coming."⁷

This past Monday, I went to an Advent Day Apart where my dear friend and colleague Bishop Violet Fisher was our guest lecturer and preacher for the day. She defined advent as our spiritual alarm clock. It is our wake-up call. She told of being on a preaching mission in another state and she had to get up at 6:00 a.m. She phoned the hotel desk and requested the wake-up call at 6:00 a.m. The man said, "Okay. Now Bishop Fisher, when would you like your second wake-up call?"

There is something in our human nature to resist the call of urgency of action. Our culture fills up our lives with busyness – as though busyness suggests a meaningful life. Life is a journey. We need to prepare for that journey. We need a priority.

From Dr. William Barclay, I learned the important spiritual truth that to be forewarned is to be fore-armed. This truth came home to me at the tender age of sixteen when I attended the famous Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. Upon arrival and our first night at 'tent city' – we headed for North Country. The journey to the North Country was centered around the climb up to Mt. Baldy – the third highest peak in the continental United States. After a four-day journey we arrived at Base Camp – before our last leg of the climb up the mountain.

One of the scout rangers came out to orient us to the environment. I never forgot the words, "Scouters like food and candy – **so do the bears.**" We were taught how to tie and secure our food supply and any sweets high up in the nearby trees. No food

was to be left in the campsite – or in our pup tents. As the senior patrol leader – I had to check to be sure our group followed these instructions explicitly. We did. Unfortunately another group nearby did not – and one of the scouts was attacked by a bear – and had to be taken back to the infirmary – and then to a nearby hospital. To be fore-warned is to be fore-armed. We are to stay awake – tend to our post – expecting and awaiting the arrival of the Master. That is why we sang that great evangelical hymn, **“Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus.”**

One of the parables found in Matthew’s gospel in **Matthew 25:1-13** is the story of the ten virgins awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. We know that in the story all ten fall asleep. However, only five were ready for that which they knew would occur.

It is our great honor to work and live out our salvation before the Master – so when he does come – he finds us working and full of faith. Some will hear the alarm clock – even on the second call – and respond and some unfortunately will not. There is much preparation to take place. That is why next week we will learn from John the Baptist we must make the crooked places straight. We must prepare the way for the new birth or our re-birth.

The early church like us was living in the in-between time between the first advent of Christ – and the last. The Bible teaches us how to live and work as believers until the end comes – which is really for us a new beginning. So what is our responsibility in this interim period?

As Bishop Vi shared “It is a time to remember who we are – and whose we are.” We are a called people – a royal priesthood – a holy nation – a people belonging to God – that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.⁸

Our Lord and Master has left work for us to do. He has invited us to be part of his great kingdom. Our Lord’s birth into human history went virtually unnoticed even though there was much biblical prophecy foretelling of his arrival. His second coming however, will not be overlooked by anyone. For some it will be a time of great completion. For some it will be catastrophic.

The truth of his second coming has suffered from two extremes. Those who ignore it and whose ears are closed to the fore-warning shared by a loving Master. They keep on living the way they are without repentance and change of direction. There is no expectation that God will actually come.

The other extreme stops working all together – and develops an almanac of the exact day when the Master will come – even when we were taught not to do that. They get so caught up in the 2nd coming – they ignore his first coming.

A man who owned one of the largest ranches in the state of Texas placed an ad in the newspaper sharing that he needed a new foreman to run the ranch because he was away on business much of the time. The interviewing process led to a choice

between two well-qualified applicants. During one of the interviews – the owners of the ranch asked, “What is your best quality?” The man responded, “**I can sleep while the wind blows.**” Those words rang a bell for him- and he hired that man. It seems that in Texas terrible wind storms could occur at any moment. The owner observed how – day in and day out – the foreman and crew were always busy at work – repairing the barn doors – fixing the fences – repairing and nailing anything that seemed to be loose. That very night a powerful wind storm came out of nowhere – and the owner looked out his 2nd story window. Everything was safe and secure – and the lights in the bunkhouse were off – and the crew was sound asleep. The next day he toured the ranch – and found little if any damage – unlike other occasions. Then he remembered the foreman saying “I can sleep when the wind blows.” The foreman anticipated and expected a storm to come. He was prepared. He had used his time – and those under him very wisely. He had used his training to prepare for that which he knew would surely come.

It was C. S. Lewis who rightly observed that in the past 2,000 years it was those – who believed in the second coming of Christ – who made the most positive difference and transformation of the world in the here and now. C. S. Lewis writes: “Aim at heaven – and you will have the earth thrown in. Aim at earth – and you will get neither.”

The Apostle Paul – writing in **II Timothy 4:1-5** – reminds his son in the faith that, “We carry out our ministry in the sight of Christ Jesus – who will come to judge the living and the dead.” We seek to please and honor him. We don’t get side-tracked. We stay at our post or pulpit. As God was at work in the first appearing of Jesus Christ – so we are a part of that great work God is doing now in our world. As Christians we live out his truth and way – working and witnessing for his truth and way – so as to bring other into his kingdom before the door shuts. We have a great identity and high calling. Don’t get side-tracked. The Apostle Paul knew they could imprison him – but the word of God can never be chained. The world has already lost. The gospel message – the power and the authority of the word – the church – the kingdom will prevail.

Many of you know the name of Malcolm Muggeridge, who was a well-known journalist for the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).

He also was a well-known atheist or at best – agnostic against our Christian faith. He was assigned the job of going to Calcutta, India, to do a documentary on a frail Roman Catholic nun who provided a ministry to the least, the last, and the lost – the dying street people of Calcutta. This little nun known only to a few as Mother Teresa served her Savior Jesus Christ, by doing the ordinary work of mercy and love – but in an extraordinary way. For the first time in his life he came face to face with the power of faith. She was authentic. He could not write her off or explain her away. He surrendered his life to Christ because of the Christ-likeness he experienced in her. He became a voice for the Christian faith until his death. Mother Teresa’s life was lived in Expectancy that she would meet Christ in the poor. She stayed at her post. She was prepared. She could ‘sleep when the winds blew.’

I think of Nelson Mandella who lived for 27 years in a prison cell – and would not compromise his faith and belief. He lived with anticipation that God would act. One day he stepped out of his prisoner’s uniform – into the Presidency of the country that once denied him his voice and dignity. He stayed at his post. He could sleep when the winds blew and the wind blew for 27 years.

Advent is not primarily about our preparation for Christmas. It is much deeper than that. It is about the birth of Christ – or his rebirth in your life – my life – and the life of the world around us. Are you ready today?

Are you expecting such a birth? Have you prepared the way for it?

Yes, advent is about a much deeper and profound preparation. I pray you hear the alarm again and even the second time – and respond. To be forewarned is to be fore-armed. Have you made that spiritual decision today?

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
November 30, 2008 – First Sunday in Advent
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ENDNOTES

¹ **“The Living Pulpit,”** October-December, 1997, volume 6, No. 4, page 42.

² Fred B. Craddock, [et. al.], **Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR C,** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1994, First edition, page 5.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **TELL IT SLANT,** William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, page 175.

⁴ Ibid, Peterson, page 175.

⁵ Ibid, Peterson, page 130.

⁶ Eugene Peterson, **THE MESSAGE BIBLE,** Isaiah 64:1, 4.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its translator,** NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1136.

⁸ Ephesians 2:9-10, NIV.