

Getting our Hearts Ready to Receive Jesus

27 November 2022

Sermon Advent 1

Readings: Matthew 24:37-44 and Isaiah 2:1-5

At College, they said never start a sermon with an apology, but I do have to apologize that Gillian Southey from Christian World Service is not the preacher today. She was going to launch our Christmas Appeal which this year is for people of developing countries to have water.

I wonder how many of you have played hide and go seek. Just to remind you in case you have forgotten how it goes - one person covers their eyes, and counts slowly to ... say 100, while the others go and hide. Then the seeker yells, "Coming, ready or not!" We have lived in some great vicarages for hide and seek.

Today's Bible readings have this, "Coming, ready or not" feel to them. The church provides us with this season of Advent in order to prepare our hearts to celebrate Jesus' birth and his coming again.

"Coming, ready or not!" is a pretty good way to sum up today's Gospel. It's as if Jesus is yelling at us, as we try to hide, "Coming, ready or not!"

Jesus gives examples to his listeners of those times when things came, and the people weren't ready. His prime example is those living at the time of Noah. Despite Noah building a large ark, people did not prepare for a flood. Instead of taking seriously the potential of a disaster, the people continued to eat, drink, and marry. They lived as if life would continue unchanged.

We know in this city how things can change in a moment whether we are ready or not. In the September earthquakes I was quickly on my phone to my sisters-in-law in Wellington. I thought "If it's this bad in Christchurch, what must it be like in Wellington?" They texted back "What earthquakes?" Few of us knew to be ready. Jesus, I think, would use the example of the earthquakes rather than Noah if he was preaching to us today.

But, beyond disaster and fear, the readings speak to us of hope. Some of you will have sung the song. *It is Well with my Soul*. I'll read you just a verse in case you don't know the song: "*When peace, like a river, attends my way, when sorrow like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, you have taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.*"

For someone to write those words, they must be having a pretty cruisy life. You would think that someone who could write "*It is well with my soul,*" never knew tragedy or had a charmed life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Horatio Spafford who wrote these words, wrote them at the worst time of his life. In 1870 things started to go wrong. Spafford's only son died of scarlet fever at the age of four. A year later all his property was destroyed by the Chicago fire. Trying to cope, he took his wife and four daughters on a trip to England.

At the last minute he was held back from travelling. Going on ahead of him, his family were caught in a storm. The ship collided with another ship and was wrecked. Mrs. Spafford desperately clung to her four remaining children, but they were washed from her hands, including the baby. A telegram was sent to Horatio. It read "*Saved one.*" His wife was the only survivor. While on his voyage to meet up with her in England, the captain advised when they were passing the very spot where his little family had all perished. Horatio Spafford stood on deck, penniless and a broken man. Then he went below to his cabin and wrote, you guessed it, "*When sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, it is well, it is well with my soul.*"

This time of year, Advent holds out the promise of hope. Not hope despite the ills and trials that befall us. Rather, in the midst of trials and ills, Advent hope is born.

We have a choice this year. Are we going to open our hearts to the message of hope? Or are we going to allow ourselves to be carried along with the busyness of Christmas?

This reworking of 1 Corinthians 13 puts it so well:

If I decorate my house perfectly with bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals, and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, care in the rest homes, and give all that I have to the city mission, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir's anthem but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return, but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust... But giving the gift of love will endure.

Let us vow this day to take a moment to open our hearts to God's gift of hope, because Jesus is coming, ready or not.

Let us pray:

God of hope

*you were born not into a perfect world but into our world,
help us so to open our hearts this Advent
that your hope finds its home in us,
this Advent Sunday and forever. Amen*