

ADVENT 1 2009: *CREATE CHRISTMAS SERIES #1*

Mark 13:32-37

CREATE HOPE

You know -- pastors within our traditional / liturgical churches have had an on-going dilemma. How do we maintain the emphasis of Advent when all around us -- Christmas is already being celebrated?

You see -- in seminary, we were exhorted not to rush Christmas during Advent. No Christmas hymns were to be sung during Advent. Greenery and the Advent Wreath were acceptable -- Chrismon trees questionable -- the Nativity set up.....no way!

Advent is about being reflective. Advent is a little like Lent in that it is suppose to be a time to deeply contemplate the meaning and real impact of the Incarnation (the birth of Jesus Christ) has upon our lives and the world. If not gloomy -- Advent is to be somber.

But, the world is already celebrating Christmas. Christmas songs are already playing 24/7 on 101.5 FM. I saw Christmas decorations out in my neighborhood the weekend before Thanksgiving. Friends of mine put up their Christmas tree 10 days ago! It used to be that Christmas trees didn't get put up until Christmas Eve, and left up for the 12 Days of Christmas. Nowadays, they're put up 45 days before Christmas, and often are down and on the trash pile Christmas evening.

But it's not just the world rushing past Advent. Non-traditional, mostly self-labeled conservative, evangelical churches have jumped on the cultural parade float. Grand productions are staged early in December. And Christmas themed sermons are preached the Sundays prior to Christmas Day.

But let's not just point fingers at our brothers and sisters. I remember as a young person -- we had a "high church" pastor who forbade the singing of Christmas hymns during Advent. What a weirdo! And then as a young pastor, fresh out of seminary, I met with the same response when trying to remain true to the spirit of Advent.

The reason given for singing Christmas hymns during Advent was that we have so many good ones -- but only one -- maybe two -- Sundays during Christmas to sing them. Not a theological reason perhaps -- but practical.

Through the years -- I have waffled and wavered in my approach to Advent (but personally, and as a pastor). And all you have to do is look around (at the tree, the nativity set, the hymns listed) -- I've caved to the pressure -- both from within and without.

Like it or not -- "Christmas the Cultural Holiday" begins the week of Thanksgiving -- and ends abruptly on December 26. (It's back to the "Old time rock-n-roll" on the radio.)

But the Holy Spirit still corrects and inspires. I've been keeping abreast over the past few years at how our conservative, evangelical, non-creedal, non-denominational churches have discovered something new. It's this thing called ADVENT.

The churches that attract the most people with their updated technologies, contemporary services, and non-traditional architecture and design (that all of us denominational, traditional churches have been so eager to copy) --

They are encouraging Advent observances and activities.

What they used to called stale and out-of-touch -- they are now embracing.

And yet -- there remains a difference in how Advent had been observed over the past 50 years. And it is a challenge, even to those of us within the more "traditional, mainline" churches.

This new generation of church leaders embraces a theological understanding of Advent -- even if Chrismon trees, nativity sets, and Christmas hymns are still being used before Christmas Eve.

Advent observances and activities are being encouraged to **counteract the consumerism of Christmas**. The consumerist understanding of Christmas has reached such a place in our culture that every year, we hear reports of individuals being injured and even killed by the Black Friday crowds at stores and shopping centers. Middle-class, suburban parents turn into thugs in "Toys-R-Us" -- a couple years ago, there was a fight between two fathers that ended in them shooting each other over a toy.

So, our sisters and brothers in non-liturgical churches are discovering what we have known all along:

-the themes and rhythm of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, can help us counteract the frenzy of cultural consuming with the peace of spiritual centering.

While Advent may be new to some, it is a cherished season of the Church for many others -- having observed it in one form or another since the 4th century.

The four Sundays preceding Christmas traditionally focus on Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Here at Divine Street, we want to facilitate the movement among believers to change the focus of these four weeks preceding Christmas from **consuming to creating**. To that end, our four Sundays will emphasize **creating** hope, **creating** peace, **creating** joy, and **creating** love.

So, we begin today with Hope.

The first Sunday of Advent calls us to look forward, not back.

So much of the Christmas ethos has us "going to Bethlehem." We bring out our nativity sets. We sing carols about shepherds, angels, wise men, and managers. There is a nostalgic comfort in escaping the hustle and bustle of our frantic decorating, wrapping, cooking, and card-sending.

It's just so nice to go back to Bethlehem.

But on the very first day of Advent, we are called to look ahead to the return of Christ.

Generally, that return is interpreted to be a return of Jesus in glory and power as the final victory of God is confirmed.

Evil is defeated.

A new heaven and a earth are created.

The old passes away and all things are made new.

In anticipation of that event, which no one can predict or perhaps truly anticipate, all of the faithful are encouraged to be alert.

And so...the sense of this Sunday is hope in the full and final establishment of the Kingdom of God.

After having read our Gospel lesson from Mark (and its parallels in the other Gospels) -- and after study and teaching over the years -- I don't think it is a violation of the text to view it in another way.

We are called to be watchful for the ways in which Jesus is continuing to come to our world.

We don't have to wait for the end of things to see how that promised Kingdom of God is already coming -- or as Jesus often said, "...is near."

There is hope -- even for our time.

The theological thinking behind "Create Christmas" is that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to join him in his mission and ministry. We are called to walk and work alongside our Living Lord in bringing God's Kingdom (God's purposes) "near" to our daily lives and the lives of those in world -- in our time.

The world has embraced Christmas. But as the world often does with the holy things of God -- the world has shaped it to meet its own purposes. The purposes of our culture are consumer-based. Christmas has become the most hedonistic of the so-called "religious" holidays.

Eat all you can

-- drink all you can -

- spend all you can -

- get all you can.

It's no wonder that people are ready for Christmas to be over, come December 25. No one can sustain such a level of gluttony.

Probably comes as no surprise to some -- but I was on the opposite side of the media-induced culture wars which focused in on whether or not retailers greeted their customers with "Happy Holidays" or "Merry Christmas."

I'd much rather have this season of over-spending be more associated with our culture's

consumer mentality with the words, "Happy Holidays."

I'd rather have the words "Merry Christmas" be a proclamation of the wondrous, self-giving action of God through the mystery of the Incarnation -- the Word of God made flesh --- And the upside down, inside out nature of that most divine event.

So yes -- I am proposing that we attempt to ground ourselves in the real "reason for the season" -- which is the birth of Jesus Christ who came not to consume, but to create a new world according to the purposes of God.

When it comes to HOPE:

I guess we don't so much create hope as witness it.

In preparing for this sermon -- I came across an acronym that my former mentor once shared for the word HOPE:

Hold **O**nto **P**reposterous **E**xpectations

Now -- I'll admit -- a preacher's first thought when teaching about God's ways is not the word *preposterous*. Yet, no other word quite captures the outlandishness of the word HOPE.

If we check out the origin of the word *preposterous*, we'd discover it is a combination of two Latin words: *pre* & *posterior*.

It literally means backwards -- or coming from behind -- or the more crude "ass-backwards."

That's what makes it just the right word.

Think about... the whole story of Christianity is preposterous (in the eyes of the world):

- that the Savior of the world would be born in a stable...
- that he would die on a cross (a criminal's death)...
- that he would be raised from the dead...
- that the way to finding fulfillment in life is to embrace sacrifice
- that the last will be first;

- the foolish will be wise;
the weak will be strong...
- that the greatest among us are the ones who serve...
 - that enemies are to be loved and prayed for...

It is basically the whole point of the Kingdom of God:

- that the societies in which we live -
 - *the societies in which people have always lived* -
-have got it backwards.

It is not God who has it all wrong -- it is the world.

As people of faith -- we are by definition, people of hope.

- And if we are people of hope,...
- we tenaciously Hold Onto Preposterous Expectations.

Let me give you some synonyms for *preposterous*:

ridiculous, absurd, irrational, unreasonable, silly, ludicrous, impossible, and the best one I found, "whacky!".....

HOPE: Hold Onto Preposterous Expectations

And think about it.....that's basically what people of faith have always done:

- Abraham held onto preposterous expectations that he and Sarah would have a child.
- Moses held onto a preposterous expectation that he could lead a bunch of former slaves to a land flowing with milk and honey.
- Mary held onto a preposterous expectation that she could give birth to the long-awaited Messiah of her people.
- The Apostle Paul held onto a preposterous expectation that Jesus, who had been killed by Romans, could save Romans.

- In our own time, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. held onto a preposterous expectation that one day our nation would rise above racial divisions and give every child a chance to be whatever he or she wanted to be.

- We've just observed the 20th anniversary of the coming down of the Berlin Wall.

There'd been people who simply accepted the wall as a fact of life -- for always. There were even people who benefited from the wall's existence. But, there were others who held onto preposterous expectations that they would be reunited with their fellow countrymen.

However ---

Holding onto expectations, no matter how realistic or unrealistic is not enough. You have to:

Help Out with Personal Engagement.

This is how we are part of creating and sustaining hope.

Before last January, we went through the painful process of budget planning -- in anticipation of the economic downturn, and we sought to prepare ourselves.

Yes -- the budget for this year, 2009, was significantly less than the previous year. And in 2010 -- there really hasn't been any change. No increase in staff salaries. No real increase in budget amounts -- just some rearranging of priorities.

Yet -- the Church Council still approved for this year -- and the next -- a budget beyond commitment pledges we've received. And that is because there is a level of expectation that this congregation (you have) for mission and ministry in and through Divine Street UMC. Local outreach, along with our mission contributions through the UMC, and those activities and practices that assist us in providing a place for people to:

Belong to a Christ-centered community,

Believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord,

and Become disciples who make a difference in our world.

And we have HOPE, here. For in raising over \$28,000 toward the down payment of a nearly 30 passenger bus -- we have made the faith statement that we:

Hold Onto Preposterous Expectations.

I can't even begin to share with you all the creative -- ministry-driven -- ideas and plans that have come from the expectation of receiving this new resource for ministry.

We've approved our Master Plan.

And while not radical -- it does present us with the challenge to remain focused on the horizon to which God is leading us. And I suspect that we will find ourselves grumbling like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness -- second guessing God's provision.

But again -- we are people of HOPE.

Just as we are moving forward in stretching ourselves so we can grow spiritually and numerically -- we have taken on a sister congregation in Slovakia as a mission-partner.

Because we are people of faith who:

Hold Onto Preposterous Expectations.

We hold onto the Kingdom value that by blessing others --even while we believe ourselves to be in need -- we will be blessed by God's gracious provision.

This Advent -- you are being challenged to be counter-cultural in these weeks leading up to Christmas.

Here is what will appear so radical and revolutionary to your neighbors:

Enter Advent with the intention to --

- **worship fully** -- centering your thoughts/actions on God
- **spend less** -- realizing the greatest gift you can give loved ones is yourself through time and service
- **give more** -- discovering that you have more than you

need, so that you join God in creating new life for others
- **love all**-- the real reason for the season is that the Word became flesh and dwell
among us so that EVERYONE might have abundant and eternal life
--- and that message is made real in our world through self-giving love -- that
breaks down all barriers and walls.

Never underestimate what your simple, personal engagement, investment in someone else's
life can do to create and nurture hope as you **Hold Onto Preposterous Expectations.**

The beautiful and holy thing is that when you do such things, the Kingdom of God comes.
And then you look, and you see Jesus in that place.

Or...when you are the one who receives the gift of hope from someone else....you can also see that
Jesus came when you least expected him -- but most needed him.

Yes -- on this first Sunday of Advent -- we look ahead to that time when everything will be made
new, and all tears will be wiped from every eye.

We need to be expectant about that happening at any time, but let's not lose sight of the truth that
Jesus isn't watching some celestial clock waiting to return at some future date.

Jesus is risen and alive -- and he continues to come in and through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus shows up wherever people need hope.....

.....What a privilege to be called upon to join Jesus....

Let us Create Hope.....

...and Hold Onto Preposterous Expectations!

