Sermon Text for December 1, 2013

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Matthew 24:36-44, Isaiah 2:1-5

“Seeing the Words”

Welcome to the first Sunday in Advent, where we are going to learn to see the words of Scripture in order that they will create within us an anticipation of the unexpected and joyful return of our Savior. We’ve often said that there is no season more special than Advent as we wait for the coming of Christ. I have something else to anticipate this year. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that I passed my hunter training so I went out with a member of the church who will go unnamed to try out a rifle. It worked, I hit the bullseye from 100 yards away on my first shot. What I hadn’t expected was the recoil from the rifle so the scope shot back into my eye socket, splitting the skin and giving me a little shiner.

Well, last week I went again, with another member of the church who will go unnamed, and I wasn’t quite as accurate, except with the scope, which nicked my forehead and split the skin right above my eye. He said that was a good thing because it meant I was relaxed. I can’t wait for next Sunday as I’m sure the saga will continue, if I make it out of the woods alive.

You know, regardless of what culture tells us, we don’t have to have everything that we want right now. How many of you went shopping on Black Friday? Shame on you! It is actually healthy to wait. Think of all the things that culture tells us that we need to have now, but Scripture tells us that it is better to actually wait. Culture tells us make all the money you can now, Scripture tells us to store up treasures in heaven, just wait. Culture tells us to have sex when you want, no matter how old you are, whether you are married or not. Scripture tells us to wait until we are married and to save that for the only love of our life. Culture tells us that we should step on people now to advance in our careers and move up the ladder, the Bible tells us that the day of judgment is coming soon, and we will all be judged in due time, so we better live as Christ has taught us. The me now generation and philosophy runs contrary to both of our Scriptures this morning which are typical Advent Scriptures. Matthew tells us to be ready and gives us images and metaphors that are not hard to see in our mind’s eye.

Isaiah gives us a few more specific metaphors. This plow in front of us today is one. It is an image that is one of the most common in Advent, even if we don’t see it in front of us. Today’s Scripture is one that is used annually during this time of year. Today it will serve as a reminder to not just hear the words of Scripture, but actually see them and pursue them. Ever wonder why the book is always better than the movie? Because we can always come up with better images that work for us than Hollywood can. The beauty of going to the Holy Land is to actually go on the Sea of Galilee, pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, see the pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed. Seeing the words come to life through our experiences allow these words of Advent today which promise an expected yet surprising future which is right around the corner. Let’s see if we can see the words as we read them.

Did you see the words as I read them? Look at vs. 1 of our Isaiah Scripture and you will find the first reference to texting that we have in the Bible. Let’s read those words again: the word that Isaiah ***saw***, not heard, but saw. That’s not how we speak, is it? Jesus in Matthew consistently uses stories and parables to get his messages across which rely upon images. The image of Noah and his family in the ark as the others are swept away. The agricultural imagery of 2 in the field and 2 grinding the meal. Do you see this imagery and the images crystal clear in your mind. Living here in Lancaster County it should not be a stretch at all to understand the impact of a worker going to glory, or meal grinder taken away. You need every warm body you can get to help out in the field, you know that.

Advent, likewise, is a time that we ought to see clearly the impact that the impending coming of Christ ought to have on our daily lives. In the midst of the business of the holidays. How many had guests over for Thanksgiving? We broke or old record of 22 people 2 years ago with 29 on Friday. Can you see 29 people in our house with 13 of them being teenagers or younger. Each one of us at one time or another snuck away for some peace and quiet in a less populated corner of the house. We ended up with the 4 brothers playing bridge till midnight.

But culture and society dampens our ability to see the need to anticipate, or look forward to, or wait so that we can live into the hope of the future. If you don’t have what you want now then you’re not trying hard enough. Scripture tells us God will provide what we need on his time, and he will allow us to see those promises so that we will wait with anticipation the unexpected, including the coming of Christ.

Isaiah was a prophet with a vision for a future. He spoke about the day that instruments of war would be transformed into agricultural aids that could feed the world. Some see Isaiah as an idealist who had no grounding in reality. That simply is not true. What is exciting for me in Scripture is that Israel knew exactly what was happening in his world and yet is still able to project a message of hope by encouraging people to not just hear but to see the Words he speaks.

In chapter 1 he tells us in verse 7 that your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire. He was in touch with not only his reality, but hear me well, our reality. Benghazi as the embassy burns with fire. Can you see it? Verse 8 he talks about daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter a cucumber field, like a besieged city and Isaiah is addressing the violence and the assaults against our daughters in Stubenville and India. Can you see it? Verse 23 everyone runs after a bribe and again they do not defend the orphan and the widow. All applicable for today. Can you see it?

Do you see the words of Isaiah as not just words that come into our ears and dissipate but rather enter our eyes and make us burn with a desire to make this world a place that when our Savior comes will receive him because of our response to the words.

For some reason it is easier to see despair than hope. But our task, our job this Advent Season is to be proponents of hope which we can only do if we see the words. You know Isaiah was not naïve when he gives us these images of hope for the future. The hope he proclaims is just as real for us today as the despair was for them. Yet hope overcomes all things.

In chapter 2:4 we read that God will arbitrate: we have an image of the controversial Iran nuclear deal which some call a straw man, others see as a sign of progress. God promises he will arbitrate one day. This past week our Presbytery voted on and passed a very ungracious dismissal policy where those leaving the denomination will have to face an onerous, even crippling financial reality that will inevitably impede ministry of the kingdom of God. The day is coming when Christ will come again and arbitrate among his beloved church, his bride which is divided. Do you see it?

Verse 4 tells us that weapons of mass destruction, or just weapons in general will be converted to agricultural tools. I see signs as our food bank is growing by leaps and bounds and we may have to expand not only in space but also programmatically as we provide counseling and other help. On a global scale these words are written on the walls of the UN in NYC and there is an amazing sculpture of the weapons being converted.

We learn how to live by seeing the bad. A simple act teaches us that the love of Christ is worth more than anything superficial or trivial that may flood our anxieties. Verse 4 tells us what we will be no longer be learning war. Aristotle used to teach his students simply by them observing him live. He also said some pretty erudite things, but he would lead them around the market and around their environments and they would learn by how he acted. We will learn war no more, these verses tell us. How can someone teach us not to have to learn war?

The hope we have found in Advent comes from seeing the words. And the hope we have for life comes from seeing and believing in, as John 1 tells us, the Word made flesh. Thomas doubted because he had no vision, no hope for the future until he saw that the words of the disciples were true and had come true.

This Advent, you may not be able to see the Words. I’ve had a number of conversations this time of year talking about families that are estranged. How can I pray for them, how can I forgive them. Seeing the Word made flesh allows us to approach all seasons of our life through the prism of hope, which as Mary states, makes all things possible.

Verse 5 is our verse beloved church. O First Presbyterian come let us walk in the light of the Lord. May God bless us and keep us as we lead others to see the light, to see the Word made flesh, to see the possibilities of all of our lives if we would just trust that these words provide a vision for our future that is perfect. Amen.