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Weekend of Sunday, December 1, 2019
1st Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5
Second Reading: Romans 13:11-14
Gospel Reading: Matthew 24:36-44
Sermon Title: “*Light of Hope*”

Theme

The new church year begins with a wake-up call: Christ is coming soon! In today’s readings both Paul and Jesus challenge us to wake from sleep, for we know neither the day nor hour of the Lord’s coming. Isaiah proclaims the day when God will gather all people on the holy mountain and there will be no more war or suffering. Though we vigilantly watch for the promised day of salvation, we wait for what we already have: Christ comes among us this day as the word and meal that strengthens our faith in the promises of God.

Text

Sermon

We aren't all that familiar with mountains here in northeast Ohio, but I suspect most of us, if not many of us have seen them in our travels. Looking back a couple hundred years, it was in November of 1806 when the explorer Zebulon Pike and company sighted and tried to summit a mountain that he called "Highest Peak." He called it that because as he travelled from the east to the west it was the highest peak he had encountered. Just why he thought attempting to summit the mountain in November of 1806 was a good idea, I do not know, but after climbing for two days without food and finding the slogging in waist high snow at four degrees below zero more than they bargained for, they gave up. Never the less, that highest peak seen from the east has become named "Pike's Peak."

A couple of years ago, when my son Aaron and I travelled from California to Ohio, in a car with squealing brakes, bald tires that wouldn't hold air because two of the wheels were cracked, and with only one windshield wiper that worked, we encountered several mountains and mountain ranges. When travelling west to east on interstate 70 mountains simply cannot be avoided. And while there were times that we had the option to take a lower altitude bypass route, the mountains called to us and drew us in, and so when given the option to take the higher altitude more dangerous route across summits, we chose that path – in a car with squealing brakes, bald tires that wouldn't hold air because two of the wheels were cracked, and with only one windshield wiper that worked. A trip like that sharpened my nerves and kept me awake with no trouble.

In the First Reading from Isaiah, Isaiah used the word "mountain" three times in five verses. Twice he wrote the expression, "mountain of the Lord" I think that is because mountains are mysterious and challenging and yet fascinating and alluring. Like Pike's Peak sighted from the east, Isaiah wrote that this "mountain of the LORD," will be "the highest of the mountains" (:2).

Weirdly, Isaiah uses pronouns when he wrote about how this "mountain of the Lord" "will teach us *his* ways" (:3) and "*he* shall judge between nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples" (:4). You see, Isaiah used a mountain as a metaphor for a future personified divine experience. And of course, we Christians see this as a prophecy about the coming of the Lord Jesus and his ministry.

In the Gospel Reading according to Matthew chapter 24, our Lord Jesus had not only already come and preached his gospel of love, grace, and mercy, but we find him during what we now call Holy Week speaking of his return. "Return? Where are you going?" the disciples must have wanted to ask, but they didn't because Jesus' attitude was focused and somber. About his return Jesus said no one knows the day or hour, but it will come like a thief in the night. So he urged his followers to "keep awake" (:42).

Did you know there is a contemporary urban expression for this? It is "woke" and woke is a past tense form of wake used in the present tense (i.e., "My mom woke me up this morning and all day I will stay woke.") In urban culture it means to stay alert to injustice in society, especially racism (i.e., "We need to be vigilant, stay aware, and stay woke.") No matter what you may think of that, that is what Jesus, the mountain of the LORD, told his followers about his return. "You need to stay woke. We need to stay woke." But it's been two-thousand years, and we've gotten complacent. Jesus predicted we would. We will spend this holiday season "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" just like Noah and his community did, and then maybe it will happen. Jesus will return. Don't ask me, I surely don't know. So we should stay "woke," keep awake.

The apostle Paul had the same advice for the Roman church. He wrote,
^{11b}"salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." Duh, thanks Captain Obvious.

And then he gave us practical advice, actually stronger than advice, he wrote very specifically what the disciple should do and not do.

We should live honorably, and if you aren't sure what that means he wrote that out;

- lay aside the works of darkness – those activities you wouldn't want your mother to know you did;
- no reveling - carousing to the extent that we aren't aware of what is going on. (I sure hope the Lord doesn't return on New Year's morning, don't you?)
- drunkenness – I think most of us know what that is. Last week I was on a YPD police ride-along, and one of the calls we responded to was a report of a stolen wallet and keys. When my squad and another arrived we were

confronted by a drunk man who insisted he was robbed. When the officers inquired how the drunk man knew he was robbed, his only answer was that he didn't have his wallet and keys and he concluded that he was robbed. Within moments we saw his wallet and keys on the steps of his house. That man better thank God that the Lord didn't return that night, because he surely would have missed him.

- Debauchery is not a word I hear used very often but it means "excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures" (Oxford).
- Licentiousness is also an unfamiliar word that means "promiscuous and unprincipled in sexual matters" (Oxford).

Sexual immorality can be addictive and make people crazy and cause a loss of focus which is what both Jesus and Paul are concerned about – that loss of focus. Remember it took King David down too.

- Paul wrote that quarrelling and jealousy are problems too. We can get so caught up in drama that we might lose sight of what the LORD is doing in our midst, maybe even overlook his return.
- And finally Paul wrote in this passage that we are to "make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires" (:14). This can mean a myriad of things but essentially I think he warns about getting too comfortable here, because our eternal destiny is with God.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Well what are we to say about these things, this First Weekend of Advent? I am so glad you asked.

I am not privy to any insider information on the Lord's return. Many thought they had it figured out and they were wrong. So what I can tell you is that Jesus said he would return and faithful disciples take him at his word. And yet because of his delay, we run the risk of complacency. "Why should we deny ourselves? He's not likely to return tonight." we convince ourselves. And yet, that is contrary to what he himself said. So we need to be ready, stay woke, living lives that are holy and godly.

Advent is that annual time of year during which we are reminded of this. And though most of us have it pretty good in this life. The next life is infinitely better. On this First Weekend of Advent we celebrate the theme of hope. Our hope is that he, Jesus Christ our Lord, comes and comes soon, so that we can begin to enjoy the reward won for us, not because we did all the right things or did not do all the wrong things, but because of what Jesus Christ has already done – for us. Our hope is built on nothing less.

Prayer

God of hope, be with us in our Advent journey to the stable and beyond,
be with us in our meeting, and in our travelling together,
be with us in our worship and our praying together,
be with us in our Advent journey to the stable and beyond,
our God of hope. Amen