FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

November 29, 2020

*“Wildly Alive in God”*

Happy New Year!

Yes, I know that seems strange and premature.  However, this Sunday marks the beginning of the *church* year.  When Advent begins, we, in the church, re-set the calendar and begin a new year.

And as new years go, we would expect to begin with a new thought, or a new idea.  Instead, in the reading we just heard from the Gospel of Mark we are again encouraged: to be ready, to be alert, to be watchful.  Mark is repeating the message that we have worked through for several weeks as we ended the *last* church year.  Moreover, Mark asks us to receive this renewed call to be prepared as a message that is uniquely centered in “hope.”

I mention all of this because I can imagine that many of us are kind of tired of hearing the same message: be alert, be prepared, you never know when: the bridegroom, or the householder, or the king—is going to return.

Yes, the message is true—we do *not* know when Christ will return.

Yes, the message is an urgent one that we do need,…but we have heard this message quite a lot already.

In fact, it occurred to me that the frequent repetition of this message was in danger of inspiring the complete opposite of its intended objective.  Instead of making me more watchful, I must admit that it is in danger of making me impatient—perhaps, even,…complacent.

If you are anything like me, your heart and mind begins to experience the hearing of this urgent message as a routine—and so, instead of listening, we begin to turn off our brains as we go through the motions of listening.

For me, it is like the routine of opening the mailbox at the apartment where I live.  I have only lived there since March but already, the receiving the mail has already become a daily routine.  I stop along side the mailbox on my way from the car in the late afternoon when I get home.

It’s not an unusual mailbox, there’s nothing unusual about it. It’s an old-fashioned kind of mailbox that most of us have.  It gives off a metallic groan when you pull down the hatch to look inside, and it shuts with a satisfying thud when I close it.

Mostly, it contains bills, fliers, and a copy of the shopping circular, *This Week.* All of this is about the same every week, day in and day out.  The copy of *This Week* changes its cover and content yet, it too, is the same as it was last week, and the week before, and the week before, etc.

And so, every week—every *day*—I do the same thing: I toss the junk, take out the bills and put them away to pay later, and I put the copy of *This Week* on the kitchen table with the intention of reading it later.  It does not matter whether or not I do.  What matters is that I have seen all of the mail and distributed it to its correct location in my life.

And so, this whole mail-routine is kind of like what happens with this message to “keep awake” and to “be alert,” I file it away in my head and my heart.  I take the message *seriously*, but at the same time: it is a message I have heard before.  We all have.  It has become a regular part of our spiritual landscape.

Perhaps that is the explanation…*and* the *remedy*.

Perhaps what we all need is to change the “landscape,” change the mental and emotional “environment” we usually inhabit when we hear this message of watchful waiting.  We need to do this in our heart and spirit because that is what Mark is doing in this passage.

Instead of the familiar routine of our lives, perhaps we need to imagine it is Jesus himself (as he is in this passage) standing before us, pronouncing these words of vigilance and attention.

Instead of a gentle message or an entertaining story that allows us to file it away with all the other details of daily life, in the Gospel of Mark, in Chapter 13, Jesus takes us to a place of upheaval and cataclysm that promises to shake us out of our routine, and into the presence of a holy truth that wants to break apart the very ground beneath our feet.

*This* is the “hope” that Advent offers, and which *we* are meant to receive: that God is doing something *new* and wonderous.  God is breaking through the old, the tired, the disfunction and dishonesty of the current world—all of that is being confronted and held to account.  All of the yearnings and suffering of God’s beloved people have been heard.

That’s what Advent is. Advent is our new horizon which is moving toward us and promising to sweep away whatever is before it.  This is what Advent is meant to do in our faith community. While we are still reminded of God’s eternal love and mercy, we are also warned to be alert, engaged, and active in preparation for what is to come.

Writing from her home in Big Timber, Montana, Lutheran minister, the Rev. Julia Seymore hear, s Jesus’ call to watchfulness within the landscape of the beauty, immensity, and the raw power of nature that she sees everywhere around her in Yellowstone National Park.  For her, Jesus’ words are like the wild beauty of the park.

The bison, the narrow, ancient canyons, and the vast prairies lend their grandeur to the message of watchfulness, making it anything but routine.  Indeed, if we allow God’s message to be filled with the force and energy of nature what we receive is an experience of a world that does not stand still in any condition—even suffering and destruction.

This is where our hope lies: that God is moving on constantly renewing the earth and all life within it.  Instead, the world, and all that is within it, is in constant motion making each step we take an exercise in the rare, rather than routine.  It is new territory, and we had best be “watchful”—not fearful—of where we are putting our feet.  We are meant to move with God, and our hope is in the next step that we are invited to take with God.

The Rev. Seymore sees the activity of the Yellowstone geysers as a reflection of the way God’s words, and Advent, are meant to move us.  She writes about it with these words:

*From a geyser, let us learn our lesson.  Its waters churn and change the landscape around it.  Its steam makes life possible that cannot exist elsewhere and also prevents the growth of other things.  When we see these things taking place, we remember that our Advent lives are contained in God’s wildness—past, present, and future.*

So, Happy New Year!

The calendar has been re-set.  Indeed, what God did more than two thousand years ago, and what God is doing even in this minute, is re-setting the world and our lives in it.  So, be advised.  Be watchful and vigilant.  Be hopeful.  Dare to be alive in the hope-filled nature of God’s wild love and faithfulness.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.