

A Pending Invitation

Part 1 of Sermon Series:
A Geography of Salvation

a sermon based on

Isaiah 2:1-5 – Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

and delivered on
December 1, 2019

First Sunday of Advent (Year A)

at
Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2019 Rev. Mark A Harkness

Today, we gather here on the first Sunday of Advent with expectation. Don't we? The church has been decorated in anticipation of Christmas just three and a half weeks away. What do we anticipate? What do we expect? Will the arrival of Christmas morning fill us with a sense of joy for what lies ahead? Or will it be with relief that the season is over?

Menards had their Christmas displays out in September, even as radio stations started to play seasonal music that same month. The four weeks of preparation that the church set aside in anticipation of celebrating the Incarnation of the Son of God on Christmas, has been usurped by four months of commercial reminders that our lives are incomplete without ostentatious gifts and the thrill of trampling our fellow human beings as we rush forward for Black Friday doorbusters.

Here's some of the irony. Where the world ties the beginning of the Christmas season to Black Friday, it's Good Friday that we celebrate as Christmas.

Just a little aside lesson. We don't actually know the day that Jesus was born. They didn't do birth certificates back in the day. It probably wasn't December. But when the church was trying to decide when to celebrate the Incarnation, it made a theological judgement. In the ancient world there was this thought that the perfect man was born and died on the same day of the year. The date they used for Easter was the Hebrew date Nissan 15 (a Sunday), that meant that Friday the 13th of Nissan was the day that Jesus died. But it seemed like that would be not only bad form but bunch things up too much to celebrate Christmas in the midst of Lent. So they thought. Jesus isn't just a perfect man; he's more than perfect. What if we mark Nissan 13 as the day of his conception? On our current calendars that works out to be March 25 (the Annunciation) which is nine months before December 25. These dates also worked out with the spring equinox and the winter solstice to make a theological point.

It's that theology that brings us here today. When we look towards Christmas we don't do so looking back to remember what happened – that Jesus was born – but we look forward to what will happen when he returns. We don't know the day or the hour any more than we know the day or the hour he was born, but we do know that each day as Paul said in that passage from Romans – that “salvation is nearer to us than when we first became believers.” (Ro. 13:11b)

Isaiah used this imagery about the Lord's house sitting on a mountain. Not just any mountain, but the highest mountain, one raised above the hills and that all nations will stream to it. (Isa. 2:2) Think about that for a minute, it's visible in a way that you can move toward it. If you've ever been to or seen mountains, have you noticed? Have you noticed that it's often easier to see the mountaintop from far away? You can't see the details, but you can see the top.

As we get closer, sometimes it that top gets obscured. Sometimes we get lost in the journey and forget that it's there.

Last year, I went backpacking in the Porcupine Mountains on the shore of Lake Superior in the upper peninsula of Michigan. I started out at the bottom of the mountain, hiking and camping two days and nights along the shore of the lake. Then I started heading up. As I headed up, I found a campsite near a stream. It was one of those perfect images. I could see fish, if I'd brought tackle. The next day, I hiked further up toward the top of that mountain. As I went, I saw more and more ideal places to stop – and stay.

Although I could see the mountain as I drove north toward it, along the lakeshore and even on the trails on the mountainside, I couldn't see the top. I started to wonder, is it worth it? Is it worth getting to the top of this mountain? Nine miles of trail and 900 feet of elevation will make an old fat guy reconsider a decision. Why not go back down to the lake where the terrain was flat? Why keep going up where the streams run narrower?

That can happen. Can't it? We look for that day of salvation, but we wonder. How much longer? Can I keep it up? Why not just stay where I'm comfortable? Often because we begin this faith journey seeing the mountaintop from afar. Someone points it out: a parent, a preacher, a Sunday School teacher; and we want to get there. Like all journeys we often start out with

exuberance. That sustains us while we're still far off and we can see the mountaintop. But as we get closer and the trees and the hills and the valleys along the path to the top obscure our view, our excitement might fade. To paraphrase Tucker from last week, "Aren't we done, yet?" Not knowing how long or how far it is can frustrate us.

The good news is that it's there. God has established the promise of his salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ. He lived and died on a cross, he rose again in action not just words. So we know his promise is true and the vision of that kingdom that talked about is real, even if we haven't got to experience it close up. Or have we?

Along the base of the Porkies, I experienced the grandeur of the mountains. I saw waterfalls. I waded in and drank from crystal clear streams of water. I saw wildlife. The trees shaded me from the burning sun. I was tired. My feet hurt (I wish I hadn't left my hiking boots at home.). Yet there were wonders I couldn't have experience otherwise.

One of the reasons that I like to go to mountains or to the top of a cliff or bluff is for the view of everything... You can only see it from the top.

As we begin this season of Advent – of expectation, let us look toward the mountaintop. Contemplate where the journey has been difficult, but notice where God has and is providing. Make an effort to appreciate and enjoy where you are now on the path to salvation; but don't let it be the end. The goal is to stand side-by-side with God our savior not as a conclusion to a journey, but to begin to claim the fulfillment of his promise.

AMEN.