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# Anticipation

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 3 December 2023

Isaiah 64:1-9 • 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 • Mark 13:24-37

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today is the first day of Advent — that time of anticipation of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not the beginning of his existence, of course, but only the beginning of his life as a human on earth. John assures us that Jesus “was in the beginning with God” (John 1:2). The beginning referred to is the very beginning of everything, not that we can really understand that. When I was 10 or 12 years old I used to go with my family to visit my cousins who had a cattle ranch a few hours away from where we lived in California. One cousin, whose nickname was “Rocky”, for reasons unknown, was about my age, and we shared a bedroom. Lying in the dark, we would talk about things like space and the universe and other big interesting things, and I remember asking him, “If time just goes on and on, then how can there be a beginning? You could always

ask what happened just before that instant you call the beginning!” Time goes on and on, and I now know that God, in a sense, goes on and on also. And Jesus goes on and on, and the Holy Spirit too, all together with God. Fortunately, we don’t have to really understand it. God doesn’t give us that kind of understanding, although maybe someday we will understand.

In a different sense, too, our time here on earth goes on and on. We celebrate the birth of Jesus every year, as if it were happening for the first time, and yet it is a part of a tradition that we consciously recognise year after year. If Jesus had simply been a man who lived 2000 years ago, was born, lived his life, and died, then we wouldn’t continue to celebrate his birthday. It is because he is alive today, and because of the wonderful thing he did for us at Golgotha, that we continue to remember, and to celebrate it, and to try to recapture a little bit of the feeling of those who witnessed his death that day. His disciples and his other followers did not realise then what his death meant for them, but it is because of their faith, and because the Holy Spirit inspired them to go out and tell the Good News, that we remember it today.

We will be preparing for the day of his human birth all month. The Gospel readings speak of readiness and preparedness. Today’s Gospel from Mark speaks of being ready, not for his first coming to Bethlehem, but for his second coming, when he will judge the world and gather all his faithful to himself. We don’t know when that will be — not even Jesus knew it then, but only God. Jesus gives us clues, about the sky darkening, and wars and rumours of wars, but they are intentionally vague. There is a danger in trying to predict precisely when Jesus will return. You might convince yourself that it will be at such and such a time, sometime in the future, and therefore relax in the meantime. But we are not to relax. We are to always be on watch, and to be on watch means to live as Jesus taught us, with love for God and our fellow humans.

Next week we’ll look at John the Baptist. He also was sent to prepare us, but in his case it was to prepare us for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry on earth. He and Jesus were cousins and about thirty years old when Jesus began the three years of teaching and prophecy which led to his death on the cross. John was sent like a military advance guard, proclaiming the coming of a king. When kings travelled, they used to send heralds ahead of them to clear their path and make the people aware that a king was coming. Just so with John — he was Jesus’ herald. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!” John’s use of such expressions would have been impressive to the people around — they would have been expecting a king. And a king is what they get, although not exactly what they expect. But the Jewish people had waited long for a Messiah, a Saviour, and John attracted a lot of attention as he proclaimed Jesus’ coming.

I think it is natural for us always to be waiting for something. We are an anticipating people. All through our lives we are waiting for, or looking forward to, or perhaps dreading, something that is to come. As children we anticipate the first day of school, or Christmas (for the presents, of course). We look forward to significant events, like graduation or our wedding day or the birth of a son or daughter. In a way, this defines us as God's people, for through all these bits of anticipation we show a kind of faith that God will provide, that the next thing will come, that our hopes will be realised. And the ultimate hope for us is for the coming of Jesus, in glory and in judgment, to gather us to himself and bring us into the kingdom of God. Without this continual anticipation, without this longing for and expectation of the next great thing, we would be a people without hope.

But we are not without hope. We have our Lord Jesus Christ and the promise he gave, in person, to people like us many years ago. That promise survives. As we prepare for the 25th of December, we do well to rekindle that hope in our hearts and our minds. The Lord is coming, in the form of a little baby in a manger — one of us, yet at the same time, the Lord of all and the fulfilment of all our hopes. Thanks be to God. Amen.