

**Mark 13:24-37** <sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup>and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. <sup>28</sup>“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that it’s near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>32</sup>“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Mark 13:24-37

11/29/2020 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“People, Get Ready”

Rev. Amy Terhune

People, get ready! Curtis Mayfield wrote those words nearly 50 years ago now, and Dr. Miller sang them for us this morning. That’s the theme of the day—getting ready. Be prepared! That’s not just the Boy Scout motto, folks. That is Advent’s purpose. People, Get ready!

But ready for what? That’s an important question as we embark on a season of waiting and preparation. For what are we supposed to be getting ready? Well, you already know what most people think—Advent is about getting ready for Christmas, right? Of course it is. It must be. Hang the lights, get out the tree, shop till you drop—the countdown begins, or something like that. Each additional candle that we light on that Advent wreath reminds us we’re steaming through the days that lead us invariably to Bethlehem. I wouldn’t blame anyone for thinking that way. Our own hymns get it wrong half time. So does our Christian education curriculum. Already, we’re looking for shepherds, angels, magi, and inhospitable innkeepers. The confusion undoubtedly stems from the fact that Christmas—the celebration of God becoming one of us, the life-changing awareness that God loved us enough to come down here in the flesh and show us the way—is the first “advent” of God: the first coming of God among us. It is a historical reality. We measure time and history by that event. It’s huge. It’s good news—very good news—for a weary, fallen world. But the season of Advent is not a countdown to Christmas. Advent is its own thing, and we dare not rush through it too fast. The baby in the manger won’t mean much if we’re not ready for it.

There’s that word again: ready. People, get ready. But for what? Early Christians, including the Apostle Paul, believed the end was coming, and soon. Theologians call that “The Second Advent of Christ”. In other words, they expected Christ to return any day now, descending on clouds with a trumpet and a legion of angels, if I remember my Bible correctly. The early church kept their eyes glued to the skies, waiting, waiting, waiting. The scripture lesson this morning is pointedly blunt about it. Mark says: Keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. In effect: People, get ready!”

The problem comes in trying to translate that for the church today. I mean, let's face it: if a preacher in a mainline denomination dares to talk about waiting for the return of Christ, they're quite likely to be written off as crazy. Perhaps that's because speaking about the return of Christ conjures up some rather superstitious imagery—trumpets, clouds, winged beasts with multiple heads. But before you write me off, hear me out, because that's something else altogether.

We need to understand: the good news is not just that God came to save us once. God loves us so much, that he is *not* willing to leave humanity in the state its presently in forever. God sees the suffering, the pain, the sin, the grief. And God has made us a promise: this isn't all there is. And I'm not just talking about life after death. I'm talking about the future of humanity. God is still working, and God will see it through. Society as we know it is not doomed to darkness forever. The tracks have been laid. The chasms of separation between us and God have been bridged by the blood of Jesus Christ. The mountains of death and sin that would seem to say 'this is the end of the line' have been cut through and burst open by the dynamite of Christ's resurrection. The tracks have been laid, the way is before us, and the train *is* coming. So people, get ready!

How? Well, start by laying down the baggage. Leave it. Let it go. We don't need it. It just gets in the way and slows us down. It amazes me, the baggage I see lined up on the platform. Resentment, bitterness, jealousy, greed, addictions, fear, past failures, past hurts. Let it go.

Even some 35 years later, I still remember so clearly a scene from the movie "The Mission" starring Robert DeNiro. He plays a slave trader who kills his brother when he catches him in an adulterous relationship with his wife. The guilt and the hurt weigh him down so much, he can hardly walk or eat. A Catholic priest convinces him to guide them up to the natives above the falls so they can evangelize there. So he puts all of his heavy armor that he used to wear when going into battle to capture natives as slaves—puts it all into a bag and he drags it behind him up the mountain. The ropes cut into his skin, the weight makes his legs tremble and brings him to his knees or catches on things and pulls him backwards. Inch by inch he climbs to the top, lugging that dead weight. And when he finally reaches the top and climbs up, the natives are there, spears pointed. Then one of the native boys sees how the weight threatens to pull this man back over the cliff, and the boy takes out a knife and cuts the rope. The armor plummets down thousands of feet to the water below the falls and disappears, and the man begins to cry, for he recognition that an indigenous child has released him from an altogether different form of slavery. From that moment on, he's free to walk upright and to look ahead.

To get ready, we must leave behind what we don't need. There, standing on the platform, we turn to the conductor and say, "those are my bags". And in the eyes of the conductor, we meet the eyes of Christ looking on us with compassion. With a polite tip of the hat, he tells us, "you just get on the train. I'll take care of the bags." If we would be ready—ready to receive Christ within, then we must turn life over to him. Advent begins a new year in the church. It's a time to let go, recommit ourselves, make a fresh start. He's willing to take on whatever weighs us down, holds us back, messes us up, or kicks us flat. He's ready and willing. People, get ready, there's a train a-comin'. Don't need no baggage, just get on board.

People, get ready. How? Lay down the baggage. Listen up. "Hear those diesels humming," says the song. It's the music of Hope. Jesus tells us that as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. He's talking about fruitfulness – about seeing the fruit of our hope. There's something on the horizon. Something worth craning your neck to see. When we lay down the baggage of the past, we let go of fear and guilt, and we make room for hope. Advent is all about hope. We're not waiting with dread or fear. We're not waiting with resignation or apathy. We're waiting with hope—with anticipation, longing, desperation, need, and joy—for a day

when suffering is alleviated and humankind lives together in peace and community. We're waiting for fruit. We believe in something greater than what is right now. That's Advent's message, isn't it? People get ready! How? Let hope fill you up.

In the comic strip *Peanuts*, Linus was watching a football game on television, cheering "Go! Go! Go!" When the game ended victoriously, he jumped up in a surge of emotion and ran out to find Charlie Brown.

"What a comeback!" he exclaimed. "The home team was behind six to nothing with only three seconds to play. They had the ball on their own one-yard line. The quarterback took the ball, faded back behind his own goal and threw a perfect pass to the left end who whirled away from four guys and ran in for the touchdown! The fans went wild! You should have seen them! And when they kicked the extra point, thousands of people ran onto the field laughing and screaming and rolling on the ground and hugging each other and everything!"

Charlie Brown turned to him then and asked, "How did the other team feel?" [from Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 2000.]

That's the question we must ask ourselves. Not everyone can hear those diesels humming. Not everyone cranes their neck from the edge of the station platform to see around the bend where the train will be coming from. Some just sit in their car at the tracks watching the train go by and regarding it as nothing more than a frustrating nuisance, holding them back from where they think they want to go, tying them up, trapping them, wasting their time. Their anger rises with the dust as the train rumbles on and on. For some, the flashing red lights and the clanging bell is the jarring sound of a headache coming on. They don't hear the humming. They don't hear the music.

There's an old story about a little girl who listened intently to the preacher's sermon about letting Jesus live in our hearts. After worship she asked him, "Preacher, I'm such a little girl and Jesus is so big, if Jesus lived in my heart, wouldn't he be sticking out some place?" [from "Who Do You Put On?" by Billy D. Strayhorn, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Well yes. And that's the point. Jesus is supposed to stick out someplace. To live in us. To be visible in us. Jesus is the hope that carries us. But he's looking for fruit, and through us, Jesus may just be the hope that tune another's ear to the distant diesels. This is a season full of hope and possibility.

People get ready! How? Lay down the baggage. Listen for the music of hope. Forget about tickets. Don't waste time looking for your ticket—the easy way in, something you can secure for yourself, earn, or purchase. There aren't tickets. This train boards by grace—its free, the invitation is open to everyone.

"Advent invites us back to the drawing board...rescuing us from resignation, delivering us from despair. The light that illumines the world's darkness is once again swinging our way. And we can move to meet it, no matter how many times we've shuttered ourselves against it. God wants us to get it right. God desires our success, not our failure. God rejoices in our accomplishments, not our frustrations. God envisions time working for us, not against us. [adapted from "It's about Time" by William A. Ritter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

My first appointment in Michigan was to Port Huron First UMC, and I recall a story told by a young mother there, not long after I had an opportunity to preach on the first Sunday of Advent. She described to me the conversation in the car on the way home from worship that day. Her son was only 5 or 6 years old at the time. (He's now an adult, by the way.) And he wanted to know what a lert was. He'd heard me say in the sermon that we should be alert, and he wanted to know what a lert was. She tried to explain about being awake, being ready, paying attention. But he asked more urgently, "Yes, but what is it?" This conversation when round and round a few times until it suddenly occurred to her

that he believed a lert was an article and a noun, as in: a dog, a cat, a boy, a girl, a lert. How do you explain to a 5 or 6 year old that alert is a verb? But all these years later, I think maybe the kid was onto something. Not that alert will ever be a noun, but theologically speaking, it's not exactly a verb either, because alert isn't just an action we take or something we do. Alert is who we are. Either we're tuned in to needs around us or we're not. Either we're looking for God around us or we're not. It's our perspective, our way of seeing the world. The good news is that it's a learned skill, like being a welder or a teacher or a lawyer. People get ready, let go the baggage, listen for the hum of hope, forget the tickets and channel God's grace into the world around you. Be alert. Look for God. Work with God.

So let's bring this all to a close. To do that, I'm going to turn to words from Dr. Leonard Sweet, who writes, that salmon, hummingbirds, butterflies, and turtles all have something in common. They go home.

"Salmon find their way from the vast ocean back to whatever tiny tributary in which they were hatched. Hummingbirds fly over 6000 miles to find their nesting sites. Butterflies congregate in the same trees, generation after generation. Migrating turtles have been known to shut down runways or streets as they make their way back to home ground.

The instinct to "go home" is world-wide, widespread in creation and often times unstoppable, especially at this time of year. Most of us get nostalgic hearing Elvis Presley croon "I'll be home for Christmas". [from "The Four Sacred Chords of Home" by Leonard Sweet, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] But this year, many of us won't be. The advice is to not travel, not gather, not go back to mom and dad's or wherever our homing signal leads us at Christmastime. Which I get. Hospitals are already stretched; the staff are already exhausted. Which means that this year, there will be more people alone on Christmas than ever before. This year, in the face of loss and grief, we're going to have to comfort each other on the phone. They say that "home is where the heart is?" Home is not just where the heart is. Home is our main hope of having a heart to begin with.

People get ready, because this year, we're going to have to find home inside our hearts someplace. The good news is that Advent is about homecoming. And I don't mean a family gathering. I don't even mean the commemoration of when Christ first made his home here amongst humankind in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Instead, get ready for Christ to be born within you. Let your spirit be his dwelling place and your heart his throne. Lay down the baggage, listen for the humming, leave the tickets, board the train. It'll take you on. It'll take you home. It'll take you inside yourself to that place where Jesus lives, where love thrives, where hope shines out. But only, my friends, if you're willing, if you're open, if you're alert. So people...get ready.

Amen.