

CHRIST MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON—Rev. Dr. Paula Winsor Sage

December 3, 2017

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (YEAR B)

MARK 13:24-37

PRAYER: Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, who are our strength and redeemer. AMEN

Good Morning! Welcome to the First Sunday in Advent. You have probably been reminded every year that the word “advent” means “coming”. When people hear this, I often hear them say to each other, “yeah, *coming* alright. Christmas is coming and I’m never going to be able to get ready on time. I don’t know how I’m going to do everything I need to do to have Christmas be the way it should be.”

Thanksgiving and Christmas are very important holidays in our culture, maybe the most important of our year. And we all have our ideas of what the “ideal”

Thanksgiving or Christmas should look like in our homes. So, let me ask you to think for a minute about your Thanksgiving this year. How many of you would say you had “the perfect Thanksgiving”, one which matched your ideal in every way?

Or, when you think about it, how many of you would qualify it by saying

something like, “Well it was great, but....,” or “It was wonderful, except for....,” or “if only ....., then it would have been perfect”. When we focus on the ideals, we tend to fixate on what didn’t quite measure up, what needed to be done differently, how we failed. Now on the one hand, trying to improve on things isn’t always bad; that is how progress is made. But on the other hand, when it concerns a celebration as important as Thanksgiving or Christmas, striving to realize an ideal often takes our minds away from the reason for the celebration. Then we end up spending too much time feeling inadequate, feeling we failed, either beating ourselves up or being critical of others who failed to live up to our ideal for them or their holiday behavior. These thoughts really can keep us from feeling the real blessings of the holiday.

That is the trouble with idealized pictures--like a Norman Rockwell painting of Thanksgiving or Christmas, or products and practices that advertisers lead us to believe are necessary for the best Christmas, or to achieve a perfection that we ourselves imagine. These unrealistic ideals keep us from seeing and enjoying the

real blessings which are there in real time. And sometimes we even spread our own disappointment of falling short to others as well.

Believe it or not, today's Gospel really has a message of help for this holiday idealism--of which I expect most of us are guilty to one degree or another.

Today's Gospel is the 5<sup>th</sup> in a row of Gospels which refer to the second coming of Jesus. Unlike some others, this Gospel does not present a frightening picture of judgment on the last day. There are no fires mentioned into which the guilty will be thrown, and no separation of sheep and goats as in last week's, and nobody is left without enough oil in her lamp as was the case three weeks ago. The focus today is on the positive, the excitement, the expectation of Jesus' coming--just as is the focus of the season of Advent. Instead of threats, Jesus tells us that, although we can never know when the last day will be that there will be signs we should watch for that Jesus is coming. Jesus says that he is going come in glory and send his angels to gather up his people from the ends of the earth. Jesus keeps reminding his hearers to **STAY AWAKE AND BE WATCHFUL**. What are we

to be watchful of? Something good coming! Signs of Jesus. Signs that he is near!

Jesus says the signs will be like branches sprouting new leaves and that they will come after the suffering and darkness and earthly disasters. It is a message of hope, not of threat. We are encouraged to be watchful--for the signs of Jesus' coming; we are not called to repent or fear. Fear and repentance of course, are not absent from any preparation to meet Jesus, but they are not emphasized here. Today's emphasis is on joyous expectation, not fear--perfect for the first Sunday of Advent.

The first Sunday of Advent brings the message of HOPE. And, as we prepare to celebrate the entrance of Christ into our lives again, this year as every year, Jesus calls us to focus, not on what we fear we cannot get done, but on the coming joy, the splendors of the season. Advent is not meant to be a time for stressing, planning, buying, worrying about living up to an ideal of purely human creation. Advent is a time for hoping, expecting, for joyful anticipation, and love. It is a time to remind ourselves that we cannot know when Jesus will appear in our

midst, and that is a good thing--just as we learned last week about finding him among the needy. We cannot know where or when Jesus will come, not because he wants to catch us doing something wrong, but because he loves us the way we are and wants to find us where we are, without any special preparation on our part. He does not want to find us trying to change into some idealized version of who we want to be.

I'm not going to tell you to stop your preparations for Christmas. (I know you probably wouldn't listen to me if I did.) But I am going to tell you that living Advent, keeping watch for the appearances of Jesus, is more important than holiday preparations and should have priority. I'm not telling you to add on extra duties. I'm suggesting that, amid your many preparations, you really think about being watchful so you don't miss sightings of Jesus' among your preparations. Look for love being shown by others rather than looking to see where they are falling short. For example: When you're waiting in line shopping, and the clerk is taking more time than you like waiting on the elderly person ahead of you, put

away the critical judgment and see Jesus in the interaction between those people.

When you see somebody drop something as you are rushing by, stop and pick it

up for them and see and feel the presence of Jesus in the eyes of the one you

help. When you start to stress preparing for visitors, stop yourself and think

about how happy you are that they are actually coming. You will see Jesus in

these simple things. When you begin to find fault with the shortcomings of a

friend or relative, or even a stranger, remember that Jesus will come and find us

as we are, just as God made us and loves us and everyone else--with our

shortcomings. If he loves us this way, we need to love others despite their

shortcomings as well, and meet Jesus in the process. In this season of hope and

expectation, let us remember also to share the Advent hope, especially with those

who seem to need some.

Jesus' command to be watchful is really a way of saying to look with new eyes at

the things you do every year to prepare. Let the candle we lighted this morning

burn as a sign of this watchfulness and hope. Jesus came for the first time, long

ago, and we are watching and waiting for his return. But in this glorious  
confusion of time and eternity which is God's kingdom here on earth, CHRIST HAS  
ALREADY COME; CHRIST IS HERE IN ALL OF US; AND CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN.  
WATCH FOR SIGNS OF HIS LOVE ALL AROUND YOU THIS SEASON, JUST AS HE  
TOLD YOU TO WATCH FOR SIGNS OF SUMMER COMING WITH THE NEW LEAVES.  
AMEN.