

"Knowing the Unknown." Isa. 64:1-9; Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19; Mk. 13:24-37
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah cried out: "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" He wanted to see the power of God breaking through all creation. He wanted to be vindicated for hanging on to his faith in the midst of trials and tribulations, exile and humiliation. Isaiah was trying to interpret the signs of the times for people who had been violently wrenched away from their homes, who had witnessed the destruction of their city and their country, who had seen the end of life as they had known it.

600 years after Isaiah, Mark's first audience was also living through a time of war and suffering. Those early Christians would have been experiencing the hostility of the Jewish community and a growing level of persecution from the Romans. They would have seen, first hand, the destruction of Jerusalem and the demolition of the Temple.

Many of them might have remembered Isaiah's words and taken much comfort in Jesus telling them that the things he foretold would happen before their generation passed away. Jesus' words would have been a call to hang on and persevere and not lose hope.

Now, more than 2,000 years later, how do we hear these texts? And do we wonder how the words of Isaiah and Jesus would sound to our ears if we were not living in a relatively peaceful and stable nation without the threat of invasion or military uprising?

Any time when people are struggling, desperate, or oppressed and trying to understand why life is the way it is, texts like these give voice to their frustrations, their hopes and their fears.

In essence the cry is: "Lord, if you are coming back, now would be a good time! We are tired of Waiting!" But still the waiting continues. It seem like some things never end. Waiting is central to our lives, central to the Church's life.

Perhaps this is why we begin the Church year with this Advent Waiting. Advent reminds us that we are not in charge, and however much we might side with Isaiah or get caught up in Gospel visions of what the end times will be like, our waiting is a school for discipleship.

As Christians, the waiting we engage in is an active waiting. There is nothing passive about it. It is active waiting because it is based on what we know and what we expect: we know the Master will return and expect the Master to return at an unexpected time.

Our expectations shape our preparations. The late actress Helen Hayes told the story on herself of the first time she was responsible for cooking the Thanksgiving Turkey dinner. She was a little anxious about it, so she prepared her husband and son by saying: "I've never cooked a turkey before, so if you don't like it, please don't say anything. Just get up from the table, put on your coats, and we'll go out to eat for Thanksgiving." She left the room to go check on the meal. When she came back her family was sitting at the table with their coats already on.

What we expect to happen shapes what we do right now. We expected family and friends to gather on Thanksgiving and we made our meal preparations accordingly. If we expect to decorate the house for Christmas, we prepare to do battle with the strings of lights that never went back into the package as neatly as they came out last year.

If we expect the Master to return we prepare by being about the Master's business each and every day. We know the timing is unknown.

As Christians we know that this "in-between time" in which we live is not a time of idle waiting. It is a time for purposeful action. We are not to be twiddling our thumbs or cowering in fear or racing about trying to make sure that we've gotten everything we're entitled to and more. We're not supposed to trample on our brothers and sisters on the way into Walmart.

No! We are called to lift up the down-trodden, to join hands with all those who know there is much to do for Jesus' sake and much reason to be doing it. Our mission has to be an expression of our faith or we won't be able to sustain it. We will get discouraged and we will lose our energy because the challenges of our day are huge and our efforts seem so small.

But even our small efforts matter. Almost every week we receive a letter of thanks here at Chapel Lane from someone that you have helped through our Pastor's Emergency Fund. With many funding sources drying up, you are helping to keep a lifeline open to others and your support has been greatly appreciated. Even though it is distributed in \$50.00 amounts, it makes a difference. It may not seem like much, but what we do matters to many.

Each day in many ways, large and small, we get reminders that the work we do as the church of Jesus Christ is never done in vain. It is never worthless effort. It is work that is an expression of our understanding of who Christ is and what Christ calls us to do as his servant people. And it is work that does not end, because God's Spirit continues to work in and through us, shaping and molding our souls just like a potter works the clay into a useful vessel. And it should be joyful work, this purpose-filled waiting of ours because the promises of God are reliable and true.

So, let us act on what we know: We know the one in whom we have believed is faithful and trustworthy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We know we do not need to know the time of Christ's return in order to lead purposeful and obedient lives.

As Jesus' disciples let us make daily preparations for the Master's return, by **watching, waiting, and working** with all the energy and eagerness of a child who knows that something good is coming, and all the wisdom and maturity of one who knows that it is worth the wait.

In the name of the One who Was and Is and Is to Come, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.