“Wait . . . What?”

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Scripture: Mark 13: 24-37

Did you ever just KNOW something and then it turned out a completely different way that you expected? In 1994 my motherly intuition made me SURE I was having a baby girl. Then Dr. Robbins handed me my son, Cameron. I said to my doctor, “Wait . . . what? I don’t know how to raise a baby boy!”

Some surprises can be good. Your very, very low expectations for a blind date are exceeded. Or your family responds with love and acceptance when you tell them your biggest secret. Surprises can also be bad. A trusted friend of 20 years deceives you. The business contract you were relying on falls through at the last moment.

We can really get tied into knots when we make assumptions about God’s involvement in our lives. It seems like many of the times we get in trouble it’s because we just KNOW how things are supposed to be—and then of course it turns out we’re wrong. As I said in the children’s sermon, sometimes there are huge surprises where you end up saying, “Wait . . . what?” Sometimes we expect what WE want to happen rather than what GOD intends to reveal to us.

The scripture Jennie read is from hundreds of years before Christ’s birth. The Israelites had been waiting for God to “tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at [God’s] presence.” Things were bad: there was a scarcity of basic resources, slaughter of entire tribes of people, enslavement, and disease. Ancient Israel needed something mighty, something disruptive, something in-breaking to come and change their world.

If you’re expecting a powerful king, a leader who waves his sword and promises utter destruction, and you get an *impoverished refugee baby* Savior, you too may be likely to say, “Wait . . . what?”

You can hear the necessity of that “tear open the heavens” big language, right? Those mighty claims are what we expect. Those are the words we need to give us hope to defeat evil. Harsh rhetoric means the good guys can win! And I wonder if even Jesus himself, when he says “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” is telling us what he knows we need to hear to have hope.

As today we begin the season of Advent, think about what the word Advent means to you. Advent literally means “waiting.” As in waiting for Christmas. Opening daily Advent calendars that reward you with some wisdom and perhaps a piece of chocolate. Getting out the Christmas decorations and remembering how each ornament was made by your kids or received as a gift from a special friend. Advent means travel, the staff Christmas party, and special music. It means cooking traditional family recipes and eating abundantly. We each have our own way of waiting.

And in its holy form, Advent, of course, is the time we wait for the Christ child to be born. God, our mighty, all powerful Creator, has chosen to send God’s very self into this world, into our lives, to preach and teach, to show us how to live. God is coming to show us what Savior, what Messiah, looks like.

And then God arrive as “the least of these” and dies broken and powerless on a cross. *Wait . . . what?*

Indulge me for a moment, please. This may be a stretch, especially for lifelong Presbyterians. Close your eyes. Think. If you knew the day, the hour, the very moment that Christ is returning, how do you imagine that would look? And how would that change the way you live your life? If Jesus is returning, say, next Saturday, what will this week look like for you as you wait? With whom will you surround yourself? Where will you be? What will you say to one another, to yourself, to God? How will you spend tomorrow, or next Tuesday?

I asked folks this question last week. Raise your hand if any of these answers sound like yours. *I’d get my act together! I’d stop paying off my student debt. I’d make sure my grandchildren knew about Jesus. I’d stop worrying about people suffering because suffering will end. I’d prepare for the greatest party imaginable. I’d be terrified and then relieved.*

One sports fan said, *“It would be better than the Super Bowl and the World Series wrapped up into one. Even better than Cyber Monday!”* And a particular “anonymous” answer was, *“The saying in golf is that not even God can hit a one-iron. I’d love to see Jesus hit a one-iron!”*

The word gospel means “good news.” The Gospel of Mark tells us the Good News to be found in Jesus Christ. But here’s the odd part to those of us picturing the child in a manger, surrounded by docile animals: Mark’s gospel doesn’t include the birth of Jesus. He skips right over what most of us think we are waiting for. Mark opens with the good news of a wild man: the locust-eating, camel-hair wearing cousin of Jesus named John the Baptist. This desert-dwelling prophet is proclaiming – shouting —that Jesus is coming. Not baby Jesus but grown up Jesus whom John baptizes. Adult Jesus, who is then immediately tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Jesus whose first words in Mark are not the sweet sighs of an infant but instead *“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”* (Mark 1:15)

Wait . . . what? What about “the cattle are lowing the poor baby wakes” and “angels we have heard on high?” What about “all is calm, all is bright?”

Jesus’ words echo the Old Testament words of Isaiah, Joel, Amos and Ezekiel. These prophets use harsh, disruptive language: the stars will not give their light, the sun will be dark at its rising (Isaiah 13:10), all shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine (Isaiah 34:4), [God] clothes the heavens with blackness (Isaiah 50:3), the heavens tremble (Joel 2:10).

In Mark 13 Jesus says “The sun will be darkened . . . [T]hey will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 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.”

The Holy Spirit is acting here at Pleasant Hill. After one of you asked me last week, “Why don’t we tackle the tough part of scripture?” this passage from Mark arrived on our church’s doorstep.

We are living right now in a strange space, between the “already” and the “not yet.” (The good Lord knows this church is in that exact space between Senior Pastors.) Jesus came, lived among us, died, and lived again. That’s the “already.” The “not yet” is Jesus’ promise to return and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the end of heaven.

What do we do during this waiting time, the time between the “already” and the “not yet?” As humans, we aren’t big fans of waiting. Martin Luther King, Jr. made famous this often quoted, optimistic, patient sentence: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” If you’re languishing in a refugee camp or watching your child suffer from an infection, you don’t have patience. How about justice NOW! How about peace NOW!

Waiting is hard, even in our everyday lives. Whether you’re waiting for the doctor to tell you your test results, or for the adoption agency to call you with news that your baby has been born . . . whether you’re waiting for news from the college where you’ve applied or you’re waiting for recognition at work for a job well done. . . and especially if you’re waiting to be treated by others based on *who you are* rather than *how you appear*—waiting is hard.

The message of Mark is clear. It matters HOW you wait. Don’t get caught by surprise. Don’t expect one thing and end up saying, “Wait . . . what?” Invest your whole being into these three things:

**Don’t wait alone.** “Where there are two are three are gathered in my name, I will be with them” (Matthew 18:20), promises God. Several of you responded to “How would things change if you knew when Jesus was returning?” by saying *I would be with my family, with my community, gathered, waiting together.* We can do that now. Wait with someone while their loved one is in surgery so you can shoulder some of their burden. Listen intently to an older friend’s bygone Christmas memories. Be a part of the women’s gathering tonight or the men’s breakfast next Friday. Gather for worship right here. Let’s wait together.

**Listen.** Jesus came 2000 years ago in an unexpected way. The people of Israel were waiting for THE SAVIOR, THE MESSIAH, THE HOLY KING. Jesus entered the world as a newborn child, an impoverished refugee. If I were a betting woman (and I’m not), my money would be on a surprise arrival again. Let go of the importance we give to power, to empire. Listen to the voices coming from the marginalized community. Stop patronizing, telling the powerless and the persecuted what you are sure they need. Listen. After all, it was from the marginalized community that Jesus’ voice was raised. So, be together and listen.

**Keep alert**. Focus not on the date of Christ’s return, but on how we *live* in anticipation. We don’t know how he’s coming. And we do not know when or where. Advent, once again, becomes a time of preparation. Let’s do it right! During this season famous for overeating and packing on pounds, this is actually a THIN month: a time when the separation between life on earth and life-with-God melts away. A time when glimpses of heaven become more apparent. Turn your focus from overdoing everything—or being overwhelmed by everything-- to look for those thin places. This is a time to especially relish the foretaste of the kingdom of God found in the bread and the cup of communion. Be together, listen and keep alert.

When I asked you to close your eyes and imagine how your life would change if you knew when Jesus was coming, what did you imagine? During *this* season of Advent, when we are in this season of preparation, what will you do? How will you live? Gather together. Listen. Keep alert. And perhaps take Christ’s words from Mark 5 literally: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” (Mark 5:19b)

Faithful disciples don’t get surprised and end up saying, “Wait . . . what?” They say, “Welcome! We’ve been preparing for You.” My it be so with each of us.

Amen.