

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, November 30, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"HE COMES IN CLOUDS"

Mark 13:26

Last week I spent a couple of hours in one of my favourite places - the dentist's office. The first stop was the hygienist's chair, and as she was doing her work she attempted to set me at ease with small talk. She asked me whether I've done any Christmas shopping yet. Now it's difficult to speak when someone is working inside your mouth and you have a drain tube hung over your lip, but I did manage to say "Yes, I've done a bit of gift shopping, but because of these times we're all going through, my family's not spending as much on gifts this year." The hygienist said, "Well, that should make Christmas less stressful for you."

It's typical, isn't it, that we think of Christmas as a time of rush, rather than rest, a time of stress rather than a time of peace. A cartoon shows a boy standing with his mother by a partially decorated Christmas tree. The room is littered with boxes labelled "Christmas Decorations; Wrapping Paper; Balls and Glass; Cookie Tins." The boy says, "C'mon Mom! Get in the Christmas spirit." Slumped over a large box she says with eyes half-closed, "I am, Dear. It's only December 9 and I'm already exhausted."

Well, I hope our Advent services will provide you with some peace and comfort. I'm not here to increase your Christmas stress, but to help you focus on Him who is the reason for the season.

On the first Sunday in Advent we always focus on Christ's second coming, his coming again at the end of time to complete God's Kingdom and to take His people home. Now the images Jesus uses to describe his second coming may not immediately bring us peace and comfort. The events surrounding Jesus' second coming are unsettling. It will be a time of great cosmic upheaval. In Mark 13 Jesus says, "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great glory and power." Jesus says that His open, visible return is certain, though only the Father knows the day and the hour.

Now one reason Christ tarries is to allow the preaching of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. God wants as many people as possible to repent and turn to Him, to put their trust in Jesus and be among those whom Christ gathers for His eternal Kingdom on the last day. And before he comes we are to keep awake and to be faithful stewards. "Therefore keep watch or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: "Watch."

Now you may think, that's in the future, and doesn't have much to do with my life right now. But Christ's return is not only a future event. It happens now, not in the open and final way he describes here, but in a way that brings us hope and light and peace. "Watch and keep awake for even now He comes with power and glory." "Watch, for Christ comes now into our midst and into our lives."

Notice Christ says that his return will take place in dark and gloomy times, when the sun is darkened, when the moon fails to give its light and stars are falling from heaven. And in Jesus' parable the master comes not in the daylight. No, he comes when it's dark, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.

Now the days we are living in now may or may not be the last days. God knows the timetable; we don't. But even if these are not the last days, these are dark and gloomy days in many ways. And I don't mean just that the daylight hours are becoming shorter and shorter. I've rarely known a time when people's spirits seem more dark and gloomy. This is just as bad as the time after 9/11.

Do you know what the trouble is with old photos, taken before the 1960's, when colour photos became more common? The problem is that they are in black and white, and when we look at them we tend to think that's what life was like - drab and grey, even when people in the photos are smiling. It wasn't of course, but that what it looks like without colour. If you could take a snapshot of people's spirits today they would be drab and grey, like old black and white photos. We know something not so-good is on its way and even if it hasn't quite reached us, we sense that it's just around the corner. Economic stresses are coming that we haven't experienced in a long time, times of hardship and anxiety and fear for many people. Plus there are the ongoing moral and social problems. The threat of terrorism which had receded to the back of our minds has reared its head again. In these days the usual sources of light are not giving much light, the stars are falling and the powers are shaken. The industrial icons of our age could soon fall. Who would have imagined it? Even the best and the brightest leaders don't know what to do.

Perhaps it's true for some of us in a personal way. We feel discouraged and gloomy about ourselves or someone we love. Perhaps it's health related, or job related. Or perhaps our spirits are heavy because of the sin that clings to our lives so closely. Perhaps we feel a sense of personal regret or failure or disappointment. Perhaps something you had hoped for failed to come through or a prayer remains unanswered. The lights you relied on seem dull, the stars you had exalted have fallen, and the powers that you had trusted are shaking. Yes, these are dark and gloomy days and we can't help but feel that gloom in our spirits.

But, says Jesus, it is in such days that we are to keep alert and watch for his coming. "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory." Here is the Advent message - don't give in to despair; don't give in to the darkness. Watch, for the Son of Man is coming in clouds with power and glory. In the Bible, clouds refer to God's presence. God's clouds are not storm clouds; rather, they bring the refreshment of God's grace. Watch, for Christ comes now into our midst and into our lives. He comes to shine in the darkness. He comes with hope and forgiveness. His coming brings the dawn and lifts the burden of gloom. And why not? Christ's first coming did that for many people. In Him the Kingdom of God came near and drew people into God's realm. Jesus was crucified on a dark afternoon, but the light of God's power and glory shone forth on Easter morning when Christ was loosed from the grave, victorious over sin and death. He is the Crucified and Risen One, the Lord and King of all, the One who has ascended to heaven, the One who will come again, the One who comes even now into our world, into our midst, into our lives. So be faithful to your calling, Jesus says to the church. Be faithful servants and in your service and at this table, and in other surprising, unexpected ways, you will know my coming.

A woman was keenly feeling her husband's absence one day some months after his death. But that day she refused to give in to the gloom. She decided that day she was going to be true to her Christian calling. Her task in her U.C.W. group is visiting elderly and shut-in folk. It's a service for which God has really gifted her. So after lunch she went out to the local nursing home where she visited 10 or 12 elderly members of her church. As the sun was setting that afternoon she walked out the nursing home door towards her car. She said, "I suddenly realized that my whole outlook had changed; the heaviness I felt had all disappeared. As I visited those folk it was just as if Jesus had come to me." I said to her, "I think he did." Being a faithful servant is a way of watching for Christ's coming. It's a way we prepare ourselves to receive his grace. Watch, for the Son of Man is coming in clouds with power and glory. Watch, for Christ

comes now into our midst and into our lives.

A couple of weeks ago, we went to see the recent Canadian movie "Passenhdaele" starring the Canadian actor Paul Gross. It's a story about a Canadian soldier's life and eventual death in World War 1. More broadly it has to do with our nation's great sacrifice in World War 1 which has largely been forgotten. It's a good movie, but definitely an adult movie, because of its' violent and graphic scenes. It's too bad that it's like that because it would be a great history lesson for our young people!

Seeing that movie reminded me of what happened one Christmas during World War 1. It was Christmas Eve. All along the Western front guns fell silent. The soldiers dug down in their trenches seeking some sleep. Suddenly, a German soldier came out of his trench, moved into no-man's land and stood there loudly singing the German words to "Silent Night." Cautiously at first, soldiers from both Allied and Axis forces emerged from their holes and then joined him, heartily singing carols together each in their own language. The next day the soldiers met again, exchanging small Christmas gifts and playing soccer together. The guns stayed silent on Christmas Day and the next day, too. Fighting resumed only when the high command on both sides threatened to charge the soldiers with treason.

Do you see what how Christ transforms our lives and the world? One day Christ will come again in the midst of the world's darkness, and the whole creation will be transformed into God's new heaven and new earth. "Watch and be awake, for the Son of Man is coming in clouds with great power and glory." But Christ's coming is not just a future hope. It is for the present, too. So take courage. Stay awake. Watch with faith. Watch, for Christ comes now into our midst and into our lives. And when you sense his presence, your life will never be the same again.