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Alexandria, VA 22310
November 28, 2010

Isaiah 2: 1–5
Matthew 24:36–44

WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW

You may be wondering what a passage like Matthew 24 has to say to us when we are supposed to be beginning a journey to Bethlehem—a Christ event, preparing for Christmas. That’s supposed to be about hope and peace, not about the fear of Christ’s second coming.

But the hope that grips our hearts during this season is not a natural hope. It’s a hope that we really have to learn. It’s a deep trust in God’s continued involvement in every aspect of our day-to-day lives. Any other hope, anything less, is superficial dreaming and fairy tales. We have to learn how to hope, and we have to learn what we are hoping will come from belief in the resurrection of Christ.

It’s much like what happens time and again at various venues across our region. Think about the times when you’ve seen those lines of parents with children waiting for their turn to read their lists to Santa Claus and sit on his lap. We think we know what will happen, don’t we? Santa is there, and there will be a smile and maybe if he’s especially jolly, a chuckle. And the elf will be standing there ready with a lollipop, and the photographer is there with a handout, if you would like a memory of the moment. But first timers—those visitors who are our smallest friends, ones that parents have dressed up and prepared for this moment—they take one look at Santa, or maybe one sniff, and their instincts scream, “Run for your life! This is danger! This is terrifying!”

And so, on the first Sunday of Advent, to read a passage like Matthew 24:36, if this instinctively says “run for your lives, you are not alone. All this second-coming language scares me. But what Jesus spoke there is very similar to what the angels said to Mary and to the shepherds. There’s wonder in mystery. There’s a reminder of what will happen if we really do trust that there is a resurrection. Jesus said to the disciples, “I am going to the father but I will return, so that where I am, there you may be also. You will be with me.”

Jesus, God’s son—yet fully God—came and lived among us, died because we are so stubborn, and then rose again from the dead. He returned to the Father, and then has said, “I will come again for you.” This is our message. The church has said for centuries “It is a mystery, but it is our message.” It is the truth of the great gospel story.

I believe it has become unpopular and maybe even seen as unsophisticated by some, but that does not make it any less true. The people of God are called to celebrate the birth of Christ as a reminder of Christ’s return. What is it that is our story and our mystery? We know Christ has died. We know Christ is risen. And we know Christ will come again. What we don’t know or fully understand how to explain is what that return will

look like in detail. And every time we try to predict it, we hear Jesus saying, “Neither the angels nor the Son knows; only the Father.”

But it's not the details that are important. What matters is what Christ's return means for our futures and for our faith, for our world and for our families. God is still in the process of healing and redeeming God's creation. God is in the process of re-establishing justice and peace for all people. And God is looking to see if those who claim to believe are willing to be identified with His Son's return. God wants to affirm our work, our faithfulness, but God cannot overlook our complacency. Ours is a definite task. We have been called upon to prepare for God's full revelation. And when Christ returns, we will regret the work we have left undone. When Christ returns, we will lament the opportunities that we did not take. And so, during Advent we seek to regain some of that urgency because we trust that Christ's return is indeed a joyous event—not a cruel, unforgiving judgment—but a strong sense of fulfillment for everything we have been anticipating.

We rehearse that expectancy during the weeks before Christmas, but we know day in and day out we share that longing to be accountable to the Savior who has changed not only our world but has changed history once and for all.

And the hope we have, though we cannot prove, we know is real. And we know it's true. So if we are to say anything about our approach to Bethlehem, we have to say we are taking God seriously this year. We are relying on God's gift of grace more than we are afraid of our failures. We are relying on God's grace for the hope of any good accomplishment, any pure thought, any action that is true and worthy of praise. We know that Christmas means God has come to be with us. Emanuel. And we also know Christ has not left us alone. Even in our darkest moments, we have not been forgotten. We know Christ will come again, and just as he said, “take us unto himself.” The only thing we don't know is what we will be doing at that moment.

I hope we're involved in some of what happened yesterday when this sanctuary was re-decorated for a season of the year that we cherish—when people came and laughed and disagreed, possibly, or held the ladder and said, “Don't hang it that way; put it over here.” But they worked together, and they saw a truly beautiful outcome. And yes, Melvin has volunteered any bow for your house or your arrangement just as he did for all of these. You just need to ask; he's quite the talent.

We have a choice this Christmas. Will we heed God's call? Will we work together to demonstrate God's concern about how we spend our lives? The mystery is so profound. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. It's incomprehensible, and at the same time it is our only response—our connection, our re-connection to what we believe the most. Let us celebrate that as we worship God. How did Paul say this? “Lord I believe; help my unbelief.”

Worship God now. Hear His invitation.