

READY OR NOT, HERE HE COMES!

Sermon, December 4, 2011

Texts: Malachi 3:1-4, 4:1-6; II Peter 3:8-15; Mark 1:1-8

Ready or not, here comes Christmas! These weeks are filled with so much activity ... all the parties, the church programs, the card sending, the shopping, the decorating, the visits to Santa. It's been observed that women are probably more conscious of the approach of Christmas than men. Someone has defined a man as a creature who buys football tickets three months in advance, but waits until Christmas Eve to do his Christmas shopping. *"Ready or not,"* says Christmas, *"here I come!"*

You've all seen those flashing red lights on top of those special vehicles usually accompanied by a piercing siren broadcasting, "Look out, here we come! Prepare the way for our passage!" That siren is also announcing, "Help is on the way!" The siren may be disturbing and/or an irritant to you as you grudgingly pull over to allow the vehicle free passage, but it is a comforting sound to the one who is in need! This ambulance is usually bringing help, assistance, hope to someone in desperate need of it. For that matter, the flashing lights and the siren of the police car is announcing the same thing. The siren announces the police are on the way to restore order and/or justice, to correct and/or repair what is wrong, they are coming to make things safe. Some of you know this, but my oldest daughter works as a dispatcher in the campus police station on her campus. She receives calls in the wee hours of the night for aid and assistance over the telephone, then radios the police on duty to direct them to the place of need. In a medical and/or fire situation, she calls/radios the local town's emergency center. Lydia has been instructed to never put a person in a crisis on hold while she's making the radio calls; that person needs the second by second comfort of hearing things are being done to ensure that help will be on the way. The dispatcher does not hang up the phone until help is actually on the way. In a way, the words of the prophets were like that ... they are like the words of the dispatcher radioing help, like the comforting, but jarring sounds of a rescue vehicle careening through the centuries with the siren call, "Help IS on the way." "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for Him!" That call may have been an irritant to some; indeed, the prophets were harshly persecuted over the years. However, their prophetic calls were a great comfort to those who knew their need of divine intervention ... those who knew their need of a Savior.

The season of Advent is all about preparing for our Lord's arrival. Yes, we do remember He came in the past, and we also remember He comes to us in many ways in the present; but don't forget it is also about preparing for when He will return in the Day yet to come. Yes, Advent is about preparation; that's as it should be ... after all, the first Christmas demanded thousands of years of preparation. God had been busy throughout all history preparing for the initial arrival of His Son. In the words of the late Henry Van Dyke, "The birth of Jesus is the *sunrise* of the Bible. Towards this point the aspirations of the prophets and the poems of the psalmists were directed, as the heads of flowers are turned toward the dawn. From this point a new day began to flow very silently over the world -- a day of faith and freedom, a day of hope and love." Yes, the birth of Jesus *is* the sunrise of the Bible.

The Bible tells us, and as just affirmed in our selection from the Westminster Confession of Faith, Jesus came in the "fullness of time." This phrase, "fullness of time," meant that everything was "ready;" all preparations have been made and the time is ripe for this momentous event to happen. The phrase "fullness of time" also had a colloquial connotation to the birth of a child. We talk about when an expectant mother is "due;" the ancient Greek would say the woman has reached the "fullness of her time"... which is true both literally and figuratively! The "fullness of time" meant this baby would arrive any minute; everything was ready. Christ was born in the "fullness of time." Many, many things came together at just that moment in history when Jesus was born; I'll name just a few: Culturally, Alexander the Great had spread the Greek language over most of the civilized world in his conquests. Greek was then established as an international language, and it was THE language by which the gospel was initially communicated. Governmentally, the Romans had furnished and enforced a system of law which made it possible for the church to grow in relative stability. Logistically, the system of Roman roads made travel by missionaries very possible; many of those roadways exist to this day throughout Europe and the Middle East. Do you think Alexander, as he was extending his empire, had any idea God was using him to prepare the way for the babe of Bethlehem? Do you suppose Julius Caesar, as he oversaw the building of roads that made commerce possible over all the known world, knew he was preparing the way for the King of Kings? When Caesar Augustus sent out his decree that all the world should be taxed and that every person should be enrolled in his own city, do you

suppose he had any idea he was bringing to pass the ancient prophecies that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? By the time John was "flashing his red lights" in the Judean wilderness in today's Gospel reading, crying out his prophetic, "*Ready or not, here He comes!*" God had already been at work for thousands of years bringing about just the right conditions for the arrival of his Son. This had been in the works since the beginning of the world; and now everything was ready.

Are you ready for Christmas? (*I know I'm not!*) More to the point, though, are you prepared for the arrival of our Lord? What would you do these next three weeks if you knew for certain Christ would actually come back on December 25th? How would you prepare for that day? Are you ready for Christmas? Henry van Dyke, who I quoted earlier, lived from 1852 –1933; he was an American author, poet and diplomat; he served as ambassador to the Netherlands and Luxembourg under Woodrow Wilson, who was one of his college classmates. Dr. Van Dyke was also a Presbyterian pastor, (*four years in Newport, RI, eighteen years at the Brick Presbyterian Church of NYC*), and served as moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. An avid outdoorsman, he wrote the words to the familiar hymn, "*Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.*" A Presbyterian pastor wrote that (*which helps belie our reputation as God's "frozen chosen"*)! In a sermon entitled: "*A Short Christmas Sermon: Keeping Christmas*" van Dyke talks about being ready for Christmas.

There is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is, keeping Christmas. Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people, and to remember what other people have done for you; [Are you willing] to ignore what the world owes you, and to think what you owe the world; to put your rights in the background, your duties in the middle distance, and your chances to do a little more than your duty in the foreground; [Are you willing] to see that your fellow men and women are just as real as you are, and try to look behind their faces to their hearts, [which are] hungry for joy; [Are you willing] to own up to the fact that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; [Are you willing] to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness — Are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas! Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough; [Are you willing] to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear in their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you; [Are you willing] to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you; [Are you willing] to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open— Are you willing to do these things, even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas. Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world— stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death— and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas. And if you can keep it for a day, why not always?

"*Ready or not ... here he comes.*" The prophet Malachi foretold that when the Lord comes to His temple, "...he will be like a refiner's fire. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver." That is a beautiful image of God, that of a refiner of gold or silver. I am told you can still see these refiners at work in the Middle East today at the oriental bazaars. A silversmith has a little crucible, in which he places a bit of ore. He fires up the crucible, melting the ore and drawing off the dross in order to purify the metal. What happens in that simple process is that under the heat of the fire the impurity and dross gradually floats to the surface. As it floats to the surface the refiner scrapes off the dross. He keeps scraping it off until finally there is no more dross to be scraped off; he keeps up this process until he is finished. How does he know when he is finished? He looks down into the crucible, and in that molten metal he sees the perfect reflection of his image. Through Jesus Christ God is at work purifying us with the fire of His spirit in the crucible of this world. He uses the fires of adversity to refine us, to restore in us the perfect reflection of His image, to make us into the people He intended us to be, and to prepare us for the judgment to come.

As Malachi 4 reiterates, and Second Peter reminds us, judgment will come. There is a Day coming when God will purge all that is wrong and corrupt and evil from His Creation! But *first* will come the day of Jesus Christ the Savior, before the day of Jesus Christ the Judge. And on this note, the Old Testament closes, no more prophecies are uttered, the voices of the prophets are stilled ... until the next prophet comes along some four centuries later with the ancient siren call, "Prepare the way ... prepare for the arrival of your Lord." Because ready or not ... here He comes.

During Advent we celebrate and remember that Hope has indeed come to this world, and that Hope is on the way ... and that God's original plan and design will one day be fully and completely restored.