

**"Preparation through Trust and Hope"**  
**Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent**  
**Lectionary Year B**  
**November 27, 2011**

**Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:32-37**  
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Today is the first Sunday of Advent and is the first Sunday of the new Christian year. There are four Sundays in Advent, and we spend them preparing for the coming (advent) of Christ. Just as Lent helps us to prepare for the death and resurrection of Jesus, Advent aids us in anticipating his birth and also in anticipating his return. We live in the "between" times, between Christ's first advent and his coming again. The lectionary passages which present themselves at this season of the year focus our attention on both of these "comings" of the Lord.

Since preparation is at the heart of this season of the Christian year, we are going to have sermons that deal with preparation. This three-week series of sermons should help us to see how we should anticipate not only Christmas in particular, but how we should live in anticipation of God's future in general and the presence of that future now in our lives.

Have you ever heard the saying, "It's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know"? We tend to hear this kind of expression when we are job

hunting. The saying points to the fact that connections sometimes can be as helpful as training or experience in gaining employment. This is why networking has been found to be extremely important in looking for a job. Obviously, if you can't do the tasks you are asked to perform, all the connections in the world are not going to help you, but it is true that knowing the right people can help you get your foot in the door.

Have you ever been in a situation where knowing someone provided you with the opportunity to do something that you ordinarily would not be able to do? I had a friend several years ago, Ken Goodwin, who was the musical director and one of the performers at Alley Cats, a club in the West End featuring dueling pianos. Ken and his wife were members of the church I served at the time, and he would get me into the club free whenever he was playing. Sometimes, when the place was particularly crowded, the only way I was able to get in at all was because I was his pastor. You probably have had similar kinds of experiences.

The other side of this fact of life also is true. Not only will knowing the right person sometimes allow you to get your foot in the door, but *not knowing* the right person can get the door slammed in your face. I remember sitting in Euell Porter's office one day when I was a student at Baylor and a member of the Baylor A Capella Choir

that Dr. Porter directed. A young lady came into his office and asked if she could audition for the choir. She proceeded to relate to him all her experiences and the qualifications she felt she had. Dr. Porter's response to her seemed rather harsh to me at the time. He said to her, "That all sounds great, but there is one problem. I don't know you." She didn't understand, but I did. You see, the A Capella Choir is a touring group that not only performs around the country but also recruits students for the university and its school of music. Dr. Porter could not risk taking someone on an extended tour if he did not know that student pretty well.

The point is that there are two sides to a person's ability to function in life. There is the *informational* side, and there is the *relational* side. In order to be able to perform well at any task or in any job, you must not only know facts, but you must know people as well. It is like getting married. When you get married for the first time, you don't know a lot about marriage as such. But hopefully you know a lot about the person you are marrying, and that is enough. As newlyweds, you may not know all that the future holds for the two of you, but you know that as long as you are together, you can handle whatever future you face.

Our scripture lessons for this morning say much the same thing about our future with God. In the passage from Mark, we hear Jesus

telling his disciples about the uncertainty of the future, especially with respect to the time of his coming. In essence, he is saying to them, "Who knows what the future holds?" In the passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul has some things to say about the God who holds the future. The apostle reminds his readers and us of the grace of God that is given in Christ, how that grace has enriched us, gifted us, and strengthened us. Paul reminds us that God is faithful, always and ever with us and for us.

The prophet Isaiah instructs the people of his day that God is their Father. In that same tradition, Jesus makes it clear in this discourse to the disciples that only the God who is our Father knows the future. In Robert Jewett's book *Jesus Against the Rapture*, the New Testament scholar suggests that Jesus would have referred to God as *Abba*, the Aramaic word that translates into English more as "daddy" or "papa" than "father." It is the way a child in that day would have addressed his or her parent—simply, intimately, and securely. Jewett goes on to explain further:

To speak of God as *Abba*, therefore, conveys the sense that he is no longer stern or distant, but loving and close. Such speaking is possible only for those who feel unconditionally accepted by him and therefore dare to impose upon his lofty majesty with their childlike lisps. . . . When Jesus insists that only the *Abba* knows the future, this sense of unconditional admission into the kingdom, of adoption as sons and daughters of God, is conveyed.

Thus his use of the word *Abba* reminds his disciples not only of the character of God but also of the nature of the future he intends to bring about [pp. 17-18].

The question could be asked, however, "If God is a loving Parent, why doesn't he let us know about the future?" What reason would God have for withholding this information from us? I have to admit a more than passing curiosity about what lies ahead for the world, for this country, for this city, for this church, for my family, and for me. I have lots of questions that I would like answered about what is in store for us as we move into a new year in only a few weeks.

My friend and fellow pastor, David Matthews, has been helpful to me at this point. In his sermon entitled "The Grace of Not Knowing," Matthews says that there is grace in *not* knowing the future, and he makes some suggestions as to why this is true. I would like to give his suggestions to you and share with you my own reflections on them.

**To know everything about the future would keep us from living so as to affect the future.** What if you were on a football team, and you knew that your team was going to win the state championship, the national title, or the Superbowl? Would you play as hard and risk hurting yourself if you knew at the beginning of the season what the outcome would be? Believe me, that never has been an option for Baylor, which is why every win they experience is a minor miracle.

The future belongs to God, make no mistake about it. However, *we are given both the opportunity and the responsibility to live so as to affect the future.* God gives us the freedom to make decisions that will make a difference. Everything is not predetermined and fixed ahead of time. If it were, the whole business of our having free will would be a joke. We don't know everything about the future, and not knowing motivates us to do our part in bringing into fulfillment the kingdom of God.

**To know everything about the future would be to bear all our burdens prematurely.** Have you ever been in a situation in which you have been tipped off ahead of time that something unpleasant was going to happen to you? In my line of work it might be that I get a call to inform me that I can expect a visit from an unhappy church member. Someone is angry with me about something, and I find out ahead of time that this person is coming to see me to unload on me.

I don't know about you, but I find that when I am in those kinds of situations, I worry myself to death. I fixate and obsess. I become anxious and stressed. More often than not, I worry way too much. I usually discover that the confrontation with the person is not nearly as bad as I was afraid it would be, and I also come to realize that the person had valid issues that needed to be addressed and would be beneficial to me and my ministry if they were. The point is that if I

knew ahead of time all the unpleasant, bad, and downright nasty stuff that was going to come my way for the rest of my life, it would drive me crazy fretting about it. It really is better that I don't know.

**To know everything about the future would be to rob our joys of much of their pleasure.** Not only would knowing everything about the future cause us pain and suffering prematurely, but it would take a lot of the fun out of life as well. Some of the most enjoyable moments of my life have come as a surprise. They were serendipities, unexpected joys. If I knew everything about my future, then I never again would be surprised, and as a result, my life would be far less pleasurable.

As you know, I like movies. If I had my way, I would see nearly every movie that comes out just as soon as it starts showing. One reason why this is true for me is that I hate my friends to tell me too much about the plot of a film before I can get to see it for myself. Knowing too much about a movie ahead of time can really spoil the experience. I think all of life works this way. One reason that God may not allow us to know as much as we might like to know about the future is in order for us to enjoy it when it comes. There is grace in not knowing, so that life can be full of pleasant surprises.

There also is grace in not knowing, because **to know everything about the future would be no longer to live by faith.** As Christians

we live by faith and not by sight. We see through a glass only dimly. And so *we have to trust*. We need to have faith in God and not only in ourselves and what we know. It is the uncertainty of life that points us to God and our need to have faith in him.

Our confidence, our security, our assurance, and our trust are based not on what we know about the future, because we can't know that. *Our trust is based on who we know*. We know God, and the God we know is a loving Parent, the Perfect Dad or Mom, who is for us and not against us. The God we know is loving, gracious, and kind. The God we know wants what is best for us. The God we know went so far as to become one like us in order to show us the depth of his love.

As we prepare to celebrate God's incarnation, we do so in a spirit of trust and hope. We trust in God and rest our hopes in him. Our knowing God may not be all we think we want to know, but it is enough to know. For it is not the informational component of our faith that is the basis of our trust and hope; it is the relational. If you know God, it is enough to provide you with all the trust and hope you need in this Advent season and beyond.