

**ADVENT 1, December 3, 2017**  
**Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Honolulu, HI**

**THE LESSONS**

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

**Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19**

**1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

**Mark 13:24-37**

**THE SERMON: "You Better Watch Out... You Better Not Pout..."**

Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God our Father, and the Communion of God, our Holy Spirit, be with us all.

**Introduction**

Since this is the 500th year of Reformation, I thought I'd start out with a Martin Luther story and I hope you'll indulge me because it is slightly off-color. It seems that Luther was having a rough time keeping the peace among all the protesting factions. So he started an Advent sermon with this story about Santa or more correctly, St. Nicholas. Luther was telling the children in his congregation that, like Luther, St. Nick, was overwhelmed with all the demands on him. There were problems everywhere. Four of his elves got sick, and the trainee elves did not produce the toys as fast as the regular ones so Santa was behind schedule. Then, Mrs. Claus told Santa that her mom was coming to visit. This stressed St. Nick even more. When he went to harness his horses (the reindeer came later..), he discovered that one of the elves had left the gate open. So, frustrated, Santa went into the house for a cup of coffee and a shot of whiskey. When he got to the cupboard, he discovered that the elves had emptied the liquor bottle and there was nothing to drink. In his frustration, he accidentally dropped the coffee pot which broke into hundreds of little pieces all over the kitchen floor. He went to get the broom and found that mice had eaten the straw it was made from. Just then the doorbell jingled and, cussing all the way, Santa opened the door and there was this cute little angel with a huge Christmas tree. The angel said, very cheerfully, "Merry Christmas, Santa. I have this beautiful tree for you. Isn't it just darling?" Don't you just hate it when some "do-gooder" tries to brighten things up? But, the angel kept pestering St. Nick. "This is such a lovely tree. Where would you like me to stick it?" The angel pushed too far as she added for the tenth time, "Where would you like me to stick it?"... Thus, Luther said this began the tradition of the little angel on top of the Christmas tree... This is most certainly true. The internet says so...

**Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19**

Reading this morning's psalm makes me think that maybe God felt like St. Nick did. This is supposedly a psalm of Asaph, a priest appointed by King David as the Temple worship leader but it almost seems like this psalm was written during the Exile as the psalmist cries out to God, "Restore us, O God... that we may be saved... how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears... You make us the scorn of our neighbors... Restore us... let your face shine, that we may be saved." After the way the Jews behaved, if God were human, God probably would have put them on top of the Christmas tree. The way the psalm is written, it almost seems that the psalmist is blaming God for their problems, "You make us the scorn of our neighbors..." God didn't do that; God's children turned away from God. They wanted to be in control and the results show what happens when

people go their own way. It's no different today. I hear people ask me why God is punishing them with misfortune. They blame God and don't have the courage or the integrity to admit that they haven't allowed God to be in control of their lives. It's only after they've screwed things up that they expect God to fix things. It doesn't work that way. God allows us to be responsible for our choices. If we want to do things our way, the psalmist realizes where that will lead; that's why he says, "... give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us... let your face shine, that we may be saved." That's what we mean when we pray, "... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." When God's will is our will, our lives will be restored. It may not be the life of the rich and the famous but it will be a life worth living.

### **Isaiah 64:1-9**

That feeling of frustration and confusion that the psalmist expresses at God's reluctance to act is mirrored in today's lesson from Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" As I've told you before, our lesson is from that portion of Isaiah which is called "Third Isaiah" and was probably written after the Jews returned from their Exile. They were refugees in their own land. The ones who weren't exiled were treating the returning exiles as illegal aliens. And, like the psalmist, the Exiles blame God for their misfortune, "... you were angry, and we sinned... We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf... for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity." But, I don't agree with the prophet; God didn't turn away from them; God was there. The Exiles turned away from God; that's why they didn't see God. Just because they prayed, doesn't mean that they turned to God. When prayers are self-centered, that's not real prayer. Real prayer is standing before God, naked and exposed with all our warts and zits, our filth and crud. We deserve to be rejected by God. But, Third Isaiah tells us, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people." Isaiah is sGod is our Father. God loves us - zits and all.

### **Mark 13:24-37**

But, when Isaiah cried out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence," it sounds like what Mark was hoping when he wrote his description of the end, "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 power and glory." But, Mark's apocalypse isn't like John's Revelation or Daniel's prophecy because there's no judgment scenario. Instead, Jesus says to look at the fig tree for the lesson. As the leaves appear, you know summer is near. But, you and I know that Mark didn't write his gospel in 33 CE (AD for us old fogies). We know he wrote it some 40 years later at the time that the Temple was destroyed. You and I have no idea what that meant to the Jews. I can't even think of any situation in our experience that even comes close. Maybe the horror of watching the Twin Towers collapsing on 9-11, multiplied ten times might give us a sense of the devastating emotional impact. So, when Mark wrote this, it must have felt like the end was upon Judaism and we can't forget that Christians in Mark's church were Jews. And, as I pointed out in previous sermons, Christians in the First Century were expecting that Jesus was returning soon and the destruction of the Temple must have seemed like a definite sign of the end. So,

Mark says to look at the fig tree... Jesus is coming soon. But, Jesus added, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come... And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." But, the Son of Man didn't come in all his glory in the First Century or the Second or the Third or the Twentieth... And, here it is almost 2018 and still no Son of Man... maybe he isn't coming at all.

### **1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

If Mark's church was facing a crisis with the destruction of the Jewish Temple, Paul was faced with a different kind of crisis in the Corinthian church. Apparently someone in the church wrote to Paul concerning some problems in the Corinthian community and this letter is in response to that. But, it's very clear that Paul is seeing this whole situation through God's eyes, "Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ... I give thanks to my God for you... because of the grace of God has been given to you... (God) will strengthen you to the end... God is faithful..." Despite all of the human problems, Paul addresses the divisions, the factions, misunderstandings, the egos, not merely with human advice but with godly advice... honestly, firmly, and with love. In fact, Paul's treatise on love in Chapter 13 is a classic description of what love is. There are few, if any, literary expressions which have captured love the way that Paul has and God is the foundation of real love. St. John may have given us the Reader's Digest version in his first letter to the church, "God is love." That's why it bothers me when I hear Christians say, "Hate the sin; love the sinner," because often I have seen Christians hating the sinner because they hate the sin. Paul has told us that God's love is unconditional. God loves the sinner. If God didn't, I wouldn't have a chance before God.

### **The Call and the Challenge**

On this first Sunday in Advent, while the stores are reminding children, "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout," because Santa Claus is coming to town, the Advent message is the Son of Man is coming to town and Isaiah and the Psalm reminded us that God's people weren't ready when he came and they ended up someplace they didn't want to be. All our lessons tell us to be ready. Mark says that the Son of Man will return in all his glory. What does that mean? When the Messiah appeared in Jesus Christ, he came as a baby and returned to the Father with the wounds and scars of Crucifixion. God's glory wasn't what we expected. The Corinthian church certainly wasn't ready when they argued about the baptisms of Apollos and Peter and Paul and demeaned the Lord's Supper as a mere social event. The Body of Christ will be ready when we fulfill our call in love, joy, peace, patience, and all the fruits of the Spirit. We won't have to watch out because the Son of Man will be revealed in his Church... in fact, wouldn't it be something if the Son of Man revealed in all his glory is the Body of Christ adorned as the Bride descending into this dark and broken world to bring healing and light and peace manifesting Christ's love...