

Squamish United Church  
Rev. Karen Millard  
Advent 1

November 30, 2014

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

## **Great Expectations**

Anticipation, hope, waiting, wonder, fear, doubt, dreams, excitement and hundreds of other emotions take place within us as we wait for something life changing. The birth of a child, a distant relative coming for a visit, the completion of a degree, a new career, a marriage...the birth of the messiah.

In the season of Advent we in the Church enter into a season of waiting. But this waiting isn't just sitting on the couch waiting for your favourite program to start. This is an active, watchful, anticipatory waiting. The theme and season of Advent is not just about waiting it is about preparing as well as noticing God here and now.

Much like parents wait for the birth of a child. Anyone who has been a parent knows that while that child is growing in the womb the waiting is very active and filled with all the emotions mentioned earlier. Many begin preparing for a child even before the pregnancy. When will this fit into our lives, what do we need to do before hand, how do we need to get our lives prepared ahead? We wonder - are we ready to take on this new responsibility? Can we afford it? Is our relationship strong enough?

And then when a couple becomes pregnant there is a multitude of preparations. Mom needs new clothes, the baby will need clothes, and a bed, and well - a thousand other things. Arrangements are made to celebrate the anticipated one, families get together to celebrate, dreams begin to be created for who this little one will become, and how they will alter our lives.

I couldn't help but think as I was preparing for today's service about the great expectations we carry for our children once they are born. How every day of parenting is about preparation of what they might become. But isn't it true that when we get too focussed on the future we miss some of the most important moments. I try really hard as a parent to live in the moment and stage my child is at. I watch so many mom's compare and judge and anticipate what it means that my child walked at nine months and yours is over a year and just crawling. The week she was born I was being asked about what school she would be registered in. My hope and desire is that as we carry our dreams and visions for these new baptized children we will carry them with a kind of advent anticipation. Great Expectations for what God will have for their lives. We may want

them to be a lawyer and God may want them to be a Social Worker. We may want an MBA player, while God may have created the perfect water girl. So often what we desire and what God has for us is not the same. Just look at the birth of the messiah. Jesus in no way met the Great Expectations of the religious leaders, and yet his presence changed the world.

Now if you have not had a child this example may not fit for you. It might even hurt a little. As someone who did not have a child until later in life, and who had a miss carriage before this one, I know how hard this example can be. And so I invite you to consider other life events because life is full of Great Expectations and longings that require preparation and study. I remember the hard questions of Should I go back to school in my 30's - can I afford it, will it be worth it, am I really cut out for this career? And then in my 40's marriage - Should I commit? It's good now - will it always be? Preparations, waiting, anticipating, hope, wonder, fear, doubt, dreams, excitement ...

In the church we also plan well ahead for this season. A month ago I sat down with a cup of my favourite Christmas tea to get me in the mood to prepare for Advent. By the time this day comes I have spent a lot of time in the season and I am more than ready for it. And oh the preparations it takes, What will be our theme? Will there be special music? Time to get practicing. How will I fit in all the services with all the other projects and events in the season?

One might say at this point in the season we are "pregnant" with excitements, dream and plans. Just as parents who are waiting for their new baby fantasize about their future with this perfect child, we too are planning for the perfect day. But what are we waiting for? A baby? Why are we so excited and why must we prepare for this?

To me the prophet Isaiah said it best "Tear Open the Heavens and come down." We are anticipating Immanuel God with us. Not just as a babe in a manger. In Jesus we believe God entered humanity, every bit of it; the joy and celebrations, the pain, and hurt. Jesus had experiences of humanity beyond our comprehension. Advent calls us to live each day in anticipation of Christ's coming and to live each day as if God is already here and now. It might seem like a bit of a dichotomy and yet it is like the expectant parents, who know the child is already with us but we wonder how our life will be different when we experience the little one in the flesh. Or perhaps it is like a feeling of waiting for a loved one to return. You know they are already there in your life, but you want them to be there right with you. Both now and not yet.

Advent is always filled with Apocalyptic scriptures and I always struggle with that but perhaps this helps remind us that this season is not just about a babe born in a manger (which in fact is not the picture, perfect, fairy tale like moment it gets made into is it?). No in fact this whole event is about God realizing that the world was desperate for hope and promise. God sent Jesus into the world so that people could see light and hope, peace and grace.

Mark, depicts Jesus as declaring his return – when the heavens shake and the sun is darkened which is precisely what occurs at the moment when he is nailed to the cross and our breath is

taken away as we see God's love poured out for us and all the world. Mark is inviting us to imagine that whenever Jesus may come again – “whether in the imminent or distant future – all of our anticipation and preparation of Jesus' second advent should be shaped by his first advent in the form of a vulnerable infant and as a man hanging on a tree. More than that, I think Mark is inviting us to look for Jesus – even here, even now – in similar places of vulnerability, openness, and need.”<sup>1</sup>

So I'm going to dare to do something different in this Advent season. We know that we are going to have so many things to do in this Advent and Christmas season. There will be celebrations and preparations and sometimes as a minister I feel a bit tempted or rather pressured to believe that my job during this season is to encourage “people not simply to wait and watch for Jesus' coming, but also to not indulge in too much Christmas lest we betray our theological and liturgical commitments to Advent. Hence we worry about Christmas carols and tree decorations in the church and are tempted to urge, if not downright scold, people into a proper observation of Advent that most of us experience more as muted, experience of “not-Christmas.”<sup>2</sup>

And so, I am going to invite us in to a more participatory Advent this year. If you were here last week you were encouraged to make New Years resolutions of faith. Perhaps you might continue this through the advent season. I want to invite you to look for Jesus in the needs of those around you, to be awake to God's presence. And at the same time I invite you to see God's presence in the midst of your own needs and desires.

“Advent has become a rather ambivalent season that is marked in equal measures by joyful anticipation and hectic, even pressured, preparation. Dinners, buying gifts, parties, cards, school holiday programs and all the rest. Each and all of it can be wonderful, and each and all of it can become rather overwhelming. And so perhaps you might make a short list – whether in your heads or on paper – of a few of the things that will occupy your Advent and then think about how in each of those events and activities you might be more attentive to the vulnerability and need of those around you and more honest and open about your own need to receive the care of others. Perhaps, in this way, we will experience Jesus' coming and God's presence in our lives even here, even now, and in this way discover, share, and actually participate in Jesus' advent among us once again.”

For many, life in this world is actually not very pleasant. But even those fortunate enough to have a life filled with joy and blessing, one should not be satisfied to the point of complacency.

There is more! There is better!

The season of Advent invites us to wait impatiently and participate in the consummation of hope, to see God face to face; to love as we have been loved; to experience Jesus Christ as he is, and in so doing, to become like him

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<sup>1</sup> Lose, David <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/advent-1-b/>

<sup>2</sup> IBID

In this season we are filled with anticipation and we have Great Expectations. How will we participate in bringing Immanuel to every experience of this season. Look for Jesus in the needs of every person you encounter at every Christmas party, dinner and gift exchange. Bring the Advent presence of hope, joy, peace and love every place you go and perhaps this season will open our eyes to the presence of God in our lives.

Amen.