

See the Signs, Be the Signs [Text -Matthew 24:36-44]

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Throughout his ministry, Jesus declares that the Realm of God is at hand - that the Divine Era of Compassion and Peace is coming, and in fact, has already arrived in this world. That's certainly a bold proclamation, particularly considering the condition of the world in which Jesus lived. His homeland was occupied by an oppressive Roman rule; his people were heavily taxed and harshly treated. Even many of his contemporary religious leaders, who were supposed to be caring for people and easing their burdens, were more interested in condemning, controlling, and weighing them down. Yet Jesus has the audacity to confidently announce that God's liberating and gracious Realm is right there within people's reach.

Now, the thing that makes Jesus' proclamation authentic and believable, is the fact that he himself *embodies* that Divine Spirit of Welcome, Love and Peace - in the *midst* of Life's most distressing circumstances. When presented with widespread suffering, Jesus responds by reaching out with uplifting compassion and healing. When confronted by injustice and intolerance, he passionately advocates for the weak, the vulnerable and the oppressed. And when threatened by hatred, violence, and the forces of fear, Jesus responds with a remarkable Spirit of love, forgiveness, and graciousness.

In the person of Jesus Christ, the Divine *Word* - the Holy Expression of all that is Good and Just - is wrapped in human form to live among us. Jesus comes to make a decisive difference in this world, by bringing good news to the poor, release to the captive, and wholeness to those whose lives are broken or hurting. *Advent* is a time to remember and celebrate the arrival of that Good News, and to do what we can to make that Good News a reality in our world today. For even though Advent is a time of anticipation and waiting, there are two distinctly different ways in which you and I can wait. We can sit and wait doing *nothing*; or we can wait like those who eagerly look forward to the arrival of a special person or a spectacular event. We can actively prepare ourselves and our surroundings for that Promised Day of Divine fulfillment - and by *doing* so, perhaps even hasten its arrival!

You and I can stand-up for the poor and hungry and helpless, using our gifts and resources to feed, assist, and encourage them. We can act-out as genuine children of our One Heavenly Parent, by reaching-out to *all* of our sisters and brothers with acceptance, kindness, and welcome. We can speak-out against bigotry and injustice, and advocate for more peaceful and constructive uses of our nation's vast riches and resources. Like the owner of the house in Jesus' example, you and I can diligently stay alert, in eager anticipation of Christ's appearance. And like those faithful followers in Jesus' parable of the Final Judgement, you and I can responsibly attend to Christ's concerns, by graciously caring for "the least of these, our sisters and brothers."

This Advent season presents us numerous opportunities to help our neighbors in need - both near and far. This Sunday, some of us will help prepare and serve a "Hunger Meal" for people gathering at Bethany UCC in Cleveland. Each Sunday we can put hats and scarves and gloves on our Mitten Tree, to be distributed to others less-fortunate. This year we are again "adopting" a family [a family of one], to help lighten the load and brighten the holiday. And as a Church Family, you and I can all make a special effort to watch-out for those around us for whom the holidays can be a sad or lonely time. Together, we can make a tremendously positive difference in this troubled world, one small step at a time; thereby signaling Christ's real and active presence in this world.

After all, that's the true purpose of this Advent and Christmas Season:

To remind us to watch for the signs - and to *become* the signs - of the Divine Realm of love, compassion, and peace;

To be prepared to do our own small part, in making that Great Realm a reality;

To remember that the Realm of God can begin with something as tiny as a newborn baby;

And to be ready to watch it grow in leaps and bounds, right before our very eyes!