

12-3-17

The Christmas Presence

By Rev. Sheryl Stewart

First Advent Sunday

Isaiah 64: 1-9 1 Cor. 1: 3-9 Mark 13: 24-37

RR: Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

Summary: This year, instead of unwrapping Christmas presents, let the Christmas Presence unwrap you.

The signs from the Hebrew Scriptures today happened before the people hearing Mark's Gospel died. So, we don't need to look at current events to say, "The last days are near." In fact, we have been living in the moment before Christ's return to reshape heaven and Earth for over two millennia now. The point of all this was not so much to know when to be ready as to encourage us to be *always* ready!

I could speak of choices: choice for God or for self, choices of truth or lies, choices of life or death. I could tell you mercy and hope wins out and God still satisfies divine justice. I could encourage you to be constant and consistent in faith. I could speak of the fear, tumult, and unfairness which we experience now, in these cruel "end times." I could

remind you, and myself, to trust God, who changes not, amid every change. And, look, I have already spoken of these things!

So, let me tell you a parable. The kingdom of Heaven is like this: One day, a Christian doctor broke the bad news of Stage 4 cancer and imminent, untimely death to his patient. As they spoke, his client wondered how he could face death with only the hope of his faith in a God he could not see.

As they spoke, a commotion and sudden laughter was heard outside the closed door of the exam room. Soon the padding of paws, scratching, and whining could be heard at their door. Recognizing the sound of his dog when she began to bark, the doctor opened the door and let her in for some petting and cuddles.

“My dog has never broken her leash and come here before,” the doctor remarked. “She has never seen anything beyond that door I just opened and she couldn’t see me in here. She scented me and knew her master was in here, and that was good enough for her.

The doctor looked his patient in the eyes and remarked. "I don't know what is behind the closed door of my death, but my faith has scented my Master there, and that is good enough for me."

His patient left with a peaceful mind.

I have yet another parable animal, perhaps familiar to some in our Gaines book club if they have read ahead. In *The Brutal Telling*, we will meet some unusual horses. Horses are, essentially, timid creatures, built for running away and secure only in herds. However, if a rider wins their trust, horses will charge into fire, smoke, gunshots, confusion, and chaos. It was this way with the unriden colt Jesus chose on Palm Sunday. The colt knew he was safe as long as he carried Jesus with him.

If you love Westerns, you know a horse may even stay to guard an injured or dying rider or even carry them to safety. One of my favorite hymns says, "You ask me how I know He lives. He lives within my heart!" As long as Jesus lives in me, I can ride out anything. I don't fear to go into the future if that is where Jesus is coming from. I am ready, now. That is more than enough; it is everything.

Our Christmas present was Jesus, and he is already unwrapped and has become the Christmas presence in our lives. That presence lasts through the whole year. It is what my friend, Claire Long, meant when she said: “We’re an Easter People with a Christmas heart.” Let Christ’s presence unwrap you from any fears or pains that bind you, and let Him take the gift of faith out of your heart and give it to God. Take His presence now, in all the “nows” you have. It will be more than enough.