

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“I’ll Keep an Eye Out for It”**

Luke 21:25 – 36

First Sunday of Advent

November 29, 2015

Back in 1985, shortly after I graduated from seminary, I applied for the Ph.D. program in pastoral theology at Emory University, down in Atlanta. At the time, I thought that I wanted to be a pastoral counselor... and Emory’s program is one of the best in the country. So, I filled out all the application forms, and got all my recommendation letters, and answered all the follow-up questions, and wrote a check for my \$50.00 non-refundable application fee, stuck it all in an envelope, and put that baby in the mail. And then I started keeping an eye out for what I hoped would be a positive reply from the university.

Sylvia and I had a post office box in those days, and I dutifully checked it every evening on my way home from my hospital chaplain job at Abington Memorial Hospital... hoping that a letter from Emory would be neatly tucked inside. But after a couple of weeks, there was still no word from Atlanta; not even so much as a postcard to let me know that they’d received my application. So, I kept on looking, and kept my eye on that P.O. Box... knowing that, sooner or later, that letter from Emory would arrive.

Eventually a month had passed, and by now my days were divided between hopeful optimism that *today* would be the day that I’d find my Emory letter waiting in the box; and impatient irritation when there was nothing *in* the box except bills, grocery coupons, and a flyer asking me to vote for Honest Joe Fribbish.

By the time we reached the two-month mark, I was practically haunting the post office... wondering how the heck long does it take to make a decision about a doctoral application? Then I started wondering if the post office had made a mistake; maybe they accidentally put my letter in some other guy’s P.O. Box... and he’d thrown the thing out with the rest of his junk mail. Anyway, for the better part of three months, I kept looking, looking, looking; but the only thing I ever saw was nothing, nothing, nothing.

Finally, one Saturday morning, when I’d almost given up hope of ever hearing back from these people... I opened my P.O. Box, peeked inside, and *there*, at last, was a letter from Emory University! I took it out to my car, tore it open, and the letter said: “*Ha ha ha ha ha! Sucker! We don’t want you, loser!*”

Okay, it didn’t say *that*. But it meant the same thing. It said, “*Dear Mr. Boyer; every year we get applications from so many wonderful, qualified, talented candidates...*” And that’s all I needed to read. I knew the answer was “no.” That line is a university-speak way of saying, “*Hey, you’re probably a nice guy... but you don’t meet our standards. Have a nice day!*” Thus endeth my pastoral counseling career! So, if you’re unhappy about me being here as your pastor, don’t blame me! Blame the Admissions Committee at Emory!

Now, I'm sure that all of us know what it's like to be looking for something with great anticipation and expectancy. We know what it's like to be on the lookout, to be champing at the bit, to be counting down the days until some highly anticipated event finally comes to pass. Maybe we're waiting to hear about a job application; maybe we're expecting the doctor to call with medical test results; maybe we're looking forward to a long-overdue vacation; maybe our kids are already asking us "how many more days 'til Christmas?" And on, and on, it goes! And as we enter into another Advent season, I want us to understand that this same principle of waiting, and anticipating, and keeping our eyes peeled for something... applies to our life of faith as well.

Now, obviously, we do most of our living-out-of-our-faith very much in the here-and-now: trying to follow Jesus in our workaday lives, trying to understand how the Bible speaks to our situations this morning, praying that God would give us our daily bread and deliver us from today's evil... whatever and wherever it may be. Most of us feel at least a little challenged and overwhelmed by the problems, and responsibilities, and difficult questions of life... so we rightly seek to build a relationship with the Lord that will strengthen and encourage us where we live at the moment. And that's good, and sensible, and proper.

But, as Luke reminds us in our lesson this morning from his gospel, there is, in addition to everything about our faith that's directed to right here, right now... a dimension of our faith that's directed to "out there," to "someday," to a hope and a promise which still has yet to come. The words of Jesus which Luke records are delivered in an apocalyptic style... not meant to be taken literally. But they are meant to be heard as reminder that, no matter what problems, difficulties, and evils might be present in the world at the moment... Almighty God still intends to have the last word on His creation.

Jesus spoke to reassure His listeners in the first century, words that still reassure *us* in the twenty-first century... that the Kingdom of God *is* coming, and in fact as already arrived in the person and ministry of Jesus. And when that kingdom is *fully* established, all the powers of sin and evil will be neutralized... vanquished... done away with forever. And God's purpose will be realized in its entirety.

Which, to our modern, troubled, often spiritually-challenged ears... sounds like just so much wishful thinking, and pious dreaming, and whistling past the cosmic graveyard. We know that, in many ways, our world is a mess... and sometimes it's really hard to get our heads around the concept that our Heavenly Father has unfinished business with this messed-up world; business that He *will* someday bring to completion.

But that is *exactly* what Jesus is saying in our text from Luke this morning; and keeping that hope alive is an important and necessary discipline in our life of Christian discipleship. Because without that heavenly, future-directed perspective, our world really *can* seem hopelessly goofed up. Our planet really can seem to be afflicted with a terminal case of turmoil.

But to that sense of despair, our Lord says, "*No, no, no. Problems? Yes. Fear and frustration? Yes. World without hope? No way. Earth abandoned by the God that made it? Not a chance. Healing... peace... and re-creation are on the way! In the meantime... keep your eye out for it!*"

And that's what we do... even as we go about the business of living our Christian lives in our busy and tragic day-to-day world. It's what we do... as we celebrate the season of Advent; not just remembering the birth of Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem many years ago, but

remembering, too, that He was born in order to make God's whole creation *new* in years to come. It's what we do... when we celebrate the sacrament of communion; not simply recalling that Jesus gave His life for our salvation, but recalling as well that He also promised to *return* someday to establish God's Kingdom forever... in our hearts, in our souls, in our world. And by so doing, bringing salvation to this whole, troubled, universe!

So, as we make our way through this Advent season, let's keep our hearts open; let's keep our hope and trust open; let's keep our eyes open, and always on the lookout for signs of God's love... God's grace... God's hope, in the midst of a world full of challenges.

If we can do that, the coming Christmas season will be more meaningful, and more powerful, than it's ever been before! That's our Lord's promise... and that's the truth on which we take our stand as Christian disciples!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!