

# “AS THE WORLD TURNS”

**1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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**December 3, 2017 - First Sunday of Advent**

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A few years ago my daughter, Molly, gifted me a fascinating book called Humans of New York by Brandon Stanton. If you do not have a copy, put it on your Santa Claus list. Over the course of five or so years, Stanton photographed and interviewed more than ten thousand people on the streets of New York City. From that number, he culled a representative sampling and put together a book. Through some Nancy Sheets and Newman Stare magic, you will be able to see photos of a few of those people as you hear portions of their stories.

In the first story, a mother talks about her little boy, Louis, maybe seven or eight years old: *“Louis is different. He is an old soul. We live in the projects and he doesn’t know who Michael Jordan is or anything about rap music. He dresses himself in the morning. He chooses a button-down shirt and slacks and sits in the kitchen with his legs crossed and reads the newspaper. But he’s still got the heart of a child. Yesterday he had five dollars to buy himself a Halloween costume. But he saw a boy he knew while walking to the store and he chose to buy him a costume instead. I always tell him; ‘You’re different, Louis. And that’s okay.’”*<sup>1</sup>

Another story involves an elderly couple Stanton noticed sitting together on a bench. He writes, *“These two were acting like complete teenagers. When I walked up to them, she was nuzzling her head against his shoulder. She giggled the entire time I talked with them while he kept a big goofy grin on his face. Whenever I asked about their relationship, she clutched his arm, looked at him just like in the photo, giggled some more, and said, ‘We’re not telling!’”*<sup>2</sup>

Stanton one day happened across a young man sitting on a step outside of a building who in the course of their conversation said soberly, *“Nobody came to my tenth birthday party. I have a*

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<sup>1</sup> Stanton, Brandon, Humans of New York. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

*very vivid memory of helping my mother set the table, watching through the window as the sun slowly set, and then finally realizing that nobody was coming. That moment pretty much set the themes for the rest of my life.”*<sup>3</sup>

Another time, Stanton encountered an adult woman and her mother. About her mother, the daughter said, *“She loves life more than anyone I ever have known. I hope she doesn’t mind me telling you this, but recently she has had some health problems. At one point her health got so bad she called and said to me, ‘I was starting to wonder if there was any reason to go on. But then I ate the most delicious pear!’”*<sup>4</sup>

One more: A young woman was approached by Stanton who took her photo as she told him, *“Sometimes it feels like I am not a part of anything. There are so many people here in New York, you’d think I’d be able to make friends with one of them. But it always seems like everyone has got their own thing going on or their own group of friends already. Most weekends I just take a long walk or go to a restaurant by myself. I’ve done some neat things alone and I’m glad I did them, but I’m really getting to the point where I’d like to experience things with other people. Everybody tells me: ‘You should do this’ or ‘You should do that.’ But nobody says, ‘Let’s do this’ or ‘Let’s do that.’”*<sup>5</sup>

These are a few stories of people from New York but we all harbor stories no matter where we live. We live by story. Our stories are the collages and mosaics of our lives. We know each other by our stories. We make friendships and form relationships by sharing our stories. Intimacy derives from entrusting our most significant stories to those we love or care about deeply. When our stories become confused or twisted in us or we allow someone else’s story about us to become our defining story, life breaks down for us. Getting our stories clear and accurate is an important part of living healthy, well-adjusted lives. Coming to grips with our stories in truth and compassion is a requisite for growth and maturity. Even the most painful stories can be redeemed when we face them honestly and in the company of God.

Advent is a liturgical gift the church provides every year so that we may attend to the stories of our lives in the larger context of God’s story. John Calvin, in his famous opening sentences of his magisterial Institutes of the Christian Religion, claims that “nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” They go together. We cannot truly know ourselves without knowing God and we cannot know God without knowing ourselves. Our lives are skewed if we do not anchor them in

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p.224.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.410.

God and they get misconstrued if God becomes a cover for us not to take responsibility for our lives.

Advent is a time to come to know ourselves well enough to know our need for God. One of the gifts of the liturgical season of Advent is that we can come to comprehend our stories and examine our lives in the light of God's presence and action in our lives. The stories I cited at the beginning of the sermon take on a different complexion when they are seen in relation to God than when they stand alone. So, also with us and our stories.

While the liturgical space to come to better know ourselves and God is a gift, doing so can be hard work. It is not for our own benefit only but also as a public service that we do it, that is, for the sake of community. That is the meaning of the word "liturgy," that together we do work that benefits not only ourselves but the public, the community. We do the public service of working to know ourselves and to know God better so that we may live faithfully together as the beloved community<sup>6</sup> of God so that all may flourish. The liturgical seasons of the church year all have their particular work we are to do together. In Advent, we are to become more accurately and acutely awake to the stories of our own lives and of our life together in the light of the overarching story of God.

Our Christian story tells us about a people long ago facing up to their failure to keep faith with God - what the scripture calls sin - and thus they longed for a Messiah, a Christ, a Savior who not only would assure them not only that they could be forgiven but would give them the spiritual power and means to live renewed and re-formed lives.

The birth of Jesus at the culmination of that long season of expectation, the season that liturgically we now call Advent - a word that means "coming" - heralds the grand reality that God does not remain afar off from us but comes to us. God does not forsake us even in our sin. God comes to us in Christ Jesus and is called Emmanuel - "God with us." That is why Christmas, at least theologically and liturgically, is a joyous time.

In Jesus, a child is given through whom a kingdom is inaugurated that is in the world but not of it, a kingdom that is to effect on earth the peace and compassion of heaven, a kingdom in which Rick Ufford-Chase reminded us a few weeks ago, "*no one hurts or destroys in all God's holy creation.*"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A phrase made popular by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one's fellow and sister human beings.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 65:25

Today's gospel reading paints a picture in poetical terms of a second Advent that anticipates the future fulfillment of God's vision for the world. It is a part of our Christian story that assures that the world and our lives in it are moving toward something redemptive and hopeful, good and just and peaceable. The present craziness in the world and perhaps in our own lives notwithstanding, the story affirms that "the kingdom of God" is simultaneously at work in the world.

Several biblical parables and metaphors allude to it: *the leaven that finally makes the whole loaf to rise;*<sup>8</sup> *the tiny mustard seed that grows into the greatest of all bushes and becomes a home for many;*<sup>9</sup> *the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it;*<sup>10</sup> and a baby *in whom all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.*<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it matters deeply how we live our lives. The kingdom of which we first of all are citizens is in the world but, as Jesus told Pontius Pilate, not of it.<sup>12</sup> Our first allegiance is to the kingdom of Christ. We have been called into a great story from which our individual stories derive their meanings and in which we are commissioned to live with the heart and mind of Christ. The same is true in our community and national lives. In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul insists it is "*in Christ Jesus that our lives hold together.*"<sup>13</sup>

We cannot, however, gloss over the element of judgment in today's Advent gospel reading. We do not talk as much about judgment in the church as probably we should. One of my mentors, the late Dr. William Sloane Coffin, one time said that "if nothing counts against us, then nothing counts."<sup>14</sup> The judgment of God is a good thing. It often gets a bad rap in the church because we prefer to talk about the love and grace of God rather than the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We seem not to understand that grace without judgment is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace"<sup>15</sup> that minimizes our lives. If nothing counts against us, then nothing counts and we will not be taken seriously and the way we live our lives does not matter and everything devolves and falls apart for us. To be undisciplined is to be "undisciplined" and we are then simply adrift in the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 13:33

<sup>9</sup> Mark 4:30-32

<sup>10</sup> John 1:5

<sup>11</sup> Colossians 1:19

<sup>12</sup> John 18:36

<sup>13</sup> Colossians 1:17

<sup>14</sup> William Sloane Coffin in his sermon "*The Liberty of the Restored*"

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*

So God's judgment ultimately is a means of grace. It means our lives and how we live them matter very much. God's judgment is a good thing because it never seeks to punish for punishment's sake but to teach us, forgive us, to renew us, and to point us toward a way forward. Beyond the weeping of judgment is the joy of restoration.

Jesus told his followers they were to discern the signs of the kingdom of God and to stay awake and alert to them. They were to be on the lookout for what is of God, for what is true and just, for what God is doing so they could join God in doing it. Jesus speaks across the centuries to us that same message every bit as much as to his first hearers. So much of what we see in the world is temporary, fleeting, and passing away, Paul reminded the early Christians. It is what cannot be seen that endures.<sup>16</sup>

Amid the messy noise and posturings of the world, we cannot always see the steady day by day work of people of faith, of Christians, who, like Jesus, *come not to be served but to serve*.<sup>17</sup> What we cannot always see is the work of people of faith who do not care about personal acclaim or fame but the wellbeing of those who are ill or vulnerable or not highly regarded by society, the last and lost and least.

What we cannot always see is the persistence of people who, in the tradition of the prophets and Jesus and at the risk of their own lives and freedom, stand up to the brutish and bullying powers of the nation and world who would, like thieves, take what rightfully belongs to others - a place at the table of humanity, access to affordable health insurance, justice in the court rooms, civil and social rights, jobs, gender equality, income equality, racial equality, sensible gun laws, a planet that can breathe, a fair tax structure, a future.

What is the story your life is telling? Is it one in keeping with the story God is telling through Jesus Christ and the life he teaches, shows, and commends? "*Keep awake, keep alert,*" he says, lest you fall asleep, lest your life slip away from the purpose to which you have been called, lest you miss the humble glory of a Christ-guided life.

As the world and our lives continue to turn, in the coming weeks of Advent, may we consider deeply our own life's stories in the light of God's story that gives all other stories their meaning and beauty. May we welcome anew the Christ whose light no darkness can extinguish. May our own stories cohere ever more fully with the gospel story and may we stay ever awake to "*the good news of a great joy that shall be for all people.*"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:18

<sup>17</sup> Mark 10:45

<sup>18</sup> Luke 2:10

Friends, our work is before us. Advent 2017 is begun.

Amen.