

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Oh, You Better Watch Out!

Sunday, December 2, 2018

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Mark 13:33–37

I must admit that when I began thinking about this series there were some Christmas songs that I was quick to eliminate. For example, “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” did not make the list. According to one survey, “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” is now the most requested Christmas song ever and has sold more than 10 million copies. I will add, however, that some polls rate it the most disliked Christmas song of all time. I guess there is no accounting for taste.

You will also be glad to know that I decided not to use “The 12 Days of Christmas” either! Can you imagine how long that sermon would be?

For the first Sunday of Advent, I decided to use to first line to the popular Christmas song, “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town.” It fits our text and theme for today. I agree with King Duncan who said that this Christmas song sounds very much like an effort by parents to get children to behave themselves during the month of December: “Oh, you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I’m telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town.” What about these lines: “He’s making his list, checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.” In other words, “Kids, behave, or Santa will pass you by!”

The truth is many people think of God this way. Many see God as this man in heaven with a big white beard who has a list on everyone. They assume God is checking these lists every day, making sure we are behaving ourselves. Therefore, it is no surprise that many folks read the same kind of warning into our lesson for today from the gospel of Mark.

The text seems to be clear. Be ready. Jesus could come at any moment. Be watching and waiting. Stay alert. Look busy! He is going to come when you least expect him. So don’t goof off. And don’t even think about catching a quick nap. You just don’t know when he will show up. You get the impression that fear is supposed to keep us awake.

I want to turn it around today. For Advent is not about waiting with fear and trembling. Advent is about waiting with hope and expectancy. This is the time we brace ourselves for something life-giving and transforming. During Advent, God is saying, “Watch out

because something good is coming and you don’t want to miss it.” It is time to stop our pouting and crying, for God has something extraordinary for us. This is the attitude of Advent.

Attitude is very important. In fact, recently I read about twin boys who were polar opposites. One was the eternal pessimist. He saw the negative in everything. The glass was always half empty. The other one was the eternal optimist. He always saw the sunny side to things. He always saw the glass half full.

The twins’ parents were curious about this so they took their twin boys to a therapist. The therapist was also curious about how different they were so he put the pessimist in a room full of toys and observed him. The boy picked up a plane and said, “This one is awful. I’ve seen other planes a lot better than this ugly one.” Then he picked up a Matchbox car and said, “This one is terrible. My friend has a better Matchbox car than this one.” He did that with every toy.

Then the therapist put the optimist in a room full of manure and the boy immediately started digging and digging. The therapist asked, “What are you doing? Why are you digging?” The boy said, “Well, with all this manure, there’s got to be a horse in here somewhere!”

That’s optimism! Attitude is everything. It’s all in how you look at things. So often in the midst of the busyness of the season we don’t have the right attitude about Christmas. So often in our pursuit to quickly get what we want we fail to see what is most important about Christmas. So-and-so is coming and staying with us. We have this to get and this to buy. We have to get the house ready. Everything has to be perfect. And, truthfully, some of us can’t wait for it to be over so we can get back our sanity! We put so much pressure and stress on ourselves that we are miserable and the last thing we have is the right attitude about Christmas.

In our rushing and hurrying and we just don’t make time or have time for what God really wants us to experience in this season. So I believe that is one of the reasons why we have Advent. It is a time when God says, “Everyone stop. Wait! You are missing everything. Open your eyes and hearts to receive what I have for you.” So I want us to slow down this morning and prepare our hearts for what God wants us to receive this

Christmas. Because if we don't, we just might miss it. We "Better watch out!"

I think a good model for us are the shepherds in the Christmas story. They were far enough away from the busyness of the life in the big city to see and hear the message of Christmas. Luke tell us what happened:

**"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about' (Luke 2:15).**

If we are truly "watching out" this Advent, here is what we can expect to receive:

### Find A Self You Can Live With

There is a great story about the actor Kirk Douglas. He picked up a hitchhiker on a California freeway one day. The hitchhiker took off his coat and settled down for the ride when suddenly he realized who was driving. He couldn't believe Kirk Douglas had picked him up! Excited and overwhelmed, the hitchhiker asked, "Do you know who you are?"

I want to ask you that this morning: "Do you know who you are?" Some people think they are what they do. We are doctors, lawyers, businessmen, homemakers, plumbers, mechanics, etc. We do invest ourselves a lot in what we do, don't we? But who are we when we retire or lose our job? Some of you are asking that question today.

Some would have us believe that we are what we have, what we own. We are what is in our bank account. We are the car we drive. But what happens when the toys rust and the money is gone? Does having nothing mean we are nothing?

Let me tell you who you are. You are a child of God. You were loved into existence by God who loves you more than you could ever imagine. Jesus said it well, "Anyone who loves me I will come to him and make my home in him."

Would you believe that it is difficult to convince many people of this wonderful news about God's love?

Charles Allen was Senior Pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Houston, Texas, for many years. And for many years he was the best known Methodist pastor in the world. Some years ago he was interviewed by a group of ministers at an annual conference. He was asked, "What is the number-one problem you have had to deal with over the years of your ministry?" Without hesitation, he replied, "The number-one problem I have had to deal with is the mistaken notion so many people have that God is mad at them." He believed, as do I, that as long as people see themselves in the presence of an angry God, God can

never become a meaningful part of their lives (Steve Harper, *Five Marks of a Methodist*).

I agree with Dr. Allen. I have found the same thing to be true in my ministry. The world can be so cruel to people that they just can't accept, believe or see that they are precious to God.

This leads me to another extraordinary thing we will receive during Advent:

### Find A God You Can Count On

For thousands of years, scholars and theologians have filled libraries telling us who they think God is. But you can take all that the theologians have written about God and it would not come close to how the Bible is able to explain God in three simple words: "God is Love" (1st John 4:16). God is in love with you. You were made from God's love. And that is what God wants you to receive and experience this Christmas. But in order to truly receive it you have to slow down and allow yourself to experience it.

There is an old legend about God and Jesus. On the night of Christmas, Jesus was getting ready to go to earth. And just before he left heaven that night Jesus asked, "Any advice, Father? What do you want me to tell them?" God replied, "Don't complicate things. Just tell them how much I love them."

I have discovered that many people are turned off by faith, church, and religion because, quite frankly, people make it too complicated. The Christian faith was never meant to be complicated.

I am going to tell you what the faith is all about and make it as uncomplicated as I can. What I am going to tell you sums up my theological education. In fact, if you receive what I am about to tell you, you will have the equivalent of a doctoral degree in Christian theology. Here goes. Christianity is not a religion, creed, a liturgy, or a set of prayers. Christianity is not a bunch of rules and regulations or a good moral story. Christianity is a *relationship*—a relationship with the one who loved you into existence, a relationship with one who thinks you are beautiful, a relationship with the one who has a purpose for your life and loves you more than you can imagine, a relationship with a God you can count on. God could have chosen to reveal himself to us in an easier way. But because He wants a relationship with us God became one of us in Christ to show us that He loves us and that we can count on him no matter what.

You see, Christians are not perfect. Christians are not in control. Christians don't have all the answers. Christians are not better than other people. Christians are not folks that can give the perfect theological answer to

every question. Christians are those who have learned that God can be trusted. God can be trusted to give peace in the midst of the storm. God can be trusted to take what is evil and transform into something good. God can be trusted to empower you in the midst of trouble. God can be trusted to receive you when you die. God can be trusted!

The late great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen received the greatest revelation about faith at, of all places, the circus! Nouwen went to see the German trapeze group, “The Flying Rodleighs” perform. He was mesmerized by their breathtaking performance as they flew gracefully through the air. At the end of the show, he spoke with the leader of the troupe, Rodleigh himself. Nouwen asked him how he was able to perform with such grace and ease so high in the air. Rodleigh responded, “The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher ,,, The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. I’m not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me” (Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*).

So often we try to grab on God. We think that if we read enough books and go to enough Bible studies we can catch God. We think if we do enough mental gymnastics or enough fanciful praying, we can catch God. It’s not our job to catch God. God catches us. This is what Christmas is all about. God catches our hearts in Jesus Christ.

When we truly experience the “love that came down at Christmas,” we find that we are motivated to share that love with others.

### **Find A Love Worth Sharing**

1st John 4:11–12 says, “Beloved, since God loves us so much; we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us.”

I have found that so many people want to experience God in their lives. And many people will pay large sums of money to go to exotic places to experience God. They will go to conferences and retreats and try to experience God. And there is nothing wrong with any of these things. But there is a simple way to experience God that will not cost us anything. You want to experience God today? Go and give away God’s love. His love is perfected within us when we share his love with the world! Believe me, you will feel God when you share his love with others.

You haven’t lived until you have loved, and if you haven’t loved, you haven’t lived. And there are people everywhere who are hungry for God’s love. They are people we come across everyday who are hungry for someone to tell them that they are loved.

Peter Breemen wrote the book, *The God Who Won’t Let Go*. In the book, he defines love as “revealing to someone else that person’s own beauty.” Loving is showing someone else how beautiful he or she is. A person cannot discover this alone; another human being is needed. When one human being shows another human being how beautiful they are, then love happens. That’s what God in Jesus does for us—he shows us how beautiful we are. This experience compels us to show others how beautiful they are to God.

*USA Today* recently reported a story that embodies this definition of love. Here is the report: “It’s not uncommon to hear about someone picking up the check for a total stranger in a restaurant, but this one’s a little unusual because it also involves a three-page letter that moved the recipient to tears. It happened in North Carolina, when a Raleigh single mom took her 4-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son to a Pizza Hut, reports WTVD. After they arrived, she apologized in advance to a man sitting nearby because her kids tended to be loud (the boy has Aspergers and ADHD, and the girl has behavioral issues of her own).

“The man said it was no big deal and went about his meal. The mom went about trying to parent her kids as best she could in a public restaurant. After the man left, a waitress informed the woman that he had paid her bill, left a gift card, and written her a three-page letter. ‘I do not know your back story, but I have had the privilege of watching you parent your children for the past 30 minutes,’ it read. ‘I have watched you teach your children about the importance of respect, education, proper manners, communication, self-control, and kindness—all while being very patient. I will never cross your path again but am positive that you and your children have amazing futures.’”

That man did not have to do that but he had a love worth sharing. He showed that mother her own beauty. And at Christmas, you will find an entire community of people who do that for each other.

### **Discover A Church that Loves You**

In the original hit movie, “Home Alone,” Kevin accidentally gets left behind when his family leaves for a European vacation. On Christmas Eve, Kevin begins to feel sad and lonely, so he goes to church. There he meets an older man who is also unhappy because of family problems. As they engage in conversation, young Kevin admits that he feels guilty because he knows that he

didn't always treat his family right, but now he misses them terribly. "Well," says the older man, "You're in church now... and this is the place to come when you're feeling bad about yourself."

That man was right. The church, which exists because of Christmas, is indeed the place to come when we need comfort, when we need forgiveness, when we need to make a new start, when we need peace for our troubled souls. Why? Because Christ dwells with those who love him and church is filled with those who love Christ and love each other. Sometimes we forget how special we are and how much God loves us. This is why we have the church. The church reminds us how beautiful we are to God.

The church is not perfect but the church worships the perfect person who loves us perfectly and that love empowers us to be who God created us to be. This is why one of the best Christmas songs is one not usually sung at Christmas, "Jesus Loves Me." Let's sing it together!

Jesus loves you. That's the message of Christmas. If you receive it, you will find a self you can live with, a God you can count on, a love worth sharing and a church that loves you.



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