

We're Going to Disney World!

November 27th, 2016 - Westminster Presbyterian Church - Mark Aquino

This past summer was a whirlwind, done before you know it type of summer. But, in all this craziness I did manage to squeeze in a week at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. I was there to support my niece and her friends for a big dance competition at one of the Walt Disney hotels. On the days they were not competing, I took my niece and her friends to the Disney parks for the day. Each day at the parks were fast paced as we had a lot to see and do with very little time.

What you should know about me is that when I visit Disney World, I hate waiting in line so I usually make up a very detailed itinerary sometimes down to the minute. This militaristic approach ensures we see and experience everything Disney has to offer in the least amount of time. Visiting with five teenage girls means an itinerary goes right out the window and you make it up as you go.

I know that teenagers (and society) now days are less patient with daily expectations of instantaneous gratification. I expected every wait in line to be a time filled with complaining and griping from a generation that can get any item delivered within 24 hours to their doorstep with the magic of Amazon.com and other online stores. They are never taught or conditioned to wait and be patient. We arrived at one of Disney's more popular attractions called Soarin', a simulation ride with special effects that make you truly feel like you are soaring high in the sky around the world. It was not surprising to see there was a 40 minute wait.

When one girl with us said "Oh...another line", my thought was "here comes the complaints". She then continued "Good, we can finally slow down and think about what we've done all day". I was a little surprised to hear this but it did allow us to slow down and enjoy the moment. We talked about what our favorite rides were and what we are still looking forward to as well as many other life topics. We all had such an engaged conversation with minimal to no cell phone use that we didn't even notice we had moved to the front of the line. 40 minutes felt like 4 minutes. It turns out waiting was exactly what we needed to help us enjoy our vacation. Now, I know the church is not Disney World, thanks be to God. But after thinking about it, that same lesson carries over to this season of Advent which marks a new church year. Waiting in line at Disney World taught me to slow down, be patient and prepare for what's to come. We should also take this time of Advent to slow down, be patient and prepare for a time of hope and peace among all nations. Nobody likes to spend vacation time waiting in line similar to the displeasure of using holiday preparation time waiting at grocery stores, department stores, red lights, stop signs or on the phone with customer service. I've often heard many people say "I can't wait until we are done with Christmas and all the holiday stress". People see Advent and Christmas as a burdened time of chaos, stress and commercialism when it should be a time of slowing down, active waiting and sharing love with all.

A good friend told me a great story which helped me to understand our scripture reading today. The superintendent of a large school was concerned about the disarray he found in so many of the classrooms he visited. Papers were often strewn on the floor, and the students' desks were surrounded by clutter. Feeling strongly that learning could not take place in such an untidy environment, he decided to take action. He chose one classroom for an experiment, introduced himself to the students and with a smile made this proposition: "Your teacher, principal and I provide a well-equipped classroom for you to enjoy but we need your help in keeping your desks and the classroom orderly. Many of you have crumpled papers inside your desks with books left open and the pages bent. Often there are pencils on the floor under your desks along with other debris. I would like each of you to clean out your desk today and begin this school year resolving to keep it clean. One day I will return and inspect your desks and the person with the neatest desk will be given this \$100 bill. I won't tell you which day it will be. It will be a surprise. Not even your teacher or the principal will know the day."

The children squealed with excitement and began immediately pulling things from their desks, filling the trash baskets with crumpled papers, stacking their books neatly inside their desks, and neatly lining up their pencils and pens. Every morning for the first week, every student checked his or her desk to make sure it was in perfect

condition, confident that today would be the day the superintendent returned. The next week, a few boys grew weary of the exercise and returned to their former habits. By the third week, several students remarked, "I doubt if he'll come back at all. He just said that to make us keep our desks clean."

After two months, no one in the classrooms bothered to inspect their desks and in fact, forgot the superintendent's promise. Except for one girl. Dutifully, she inspected her desk every morning and several times a day, making sure things were in proper order.

For months, she was teased by the other students. "He's not coming back! Why do you keep looking for him? You look stupid believing that promise, anyway." Still, she remained quiet, kept her desk in perfect condition and waited. Near the end of the school year, there was a knock on the door and the superintendent entered. Quickly, the students flung open their desks and began frantically to clean them. But the superintendent held up his hand for them to stop. All the students were asked to stand beside their desk at attention while the superintendent inspected each desk.

One after another, he rejected them for their desks being messy and not being prepared for his visit. One boy tried giving excuses but to no avail. Another blamed the teacher for not reminding them. Still another blamed the superintendent for making them wait so long. Finally, the superintendent arrived at the desk of the little girl who confidently displayed her well-kept desk while smiling at the superintendent. After inspecting her desk, he took her by the hand to the front of the classroom and awarded her the \$100 bill.

"Boys and girls," he said kindly, "this girl never stopped believing I would return so she kept her desk in perfect order. She didn't need to worry about what day or even what time of day I would arrive because she was always ready. Always!"

Our gospel lesson says very plainly "Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour."

And how do we get ready? We get ready for his second coming by being like that little girl in our story, daily preparation. The word advent means "coming" and from now until Christmas we are patiently waiting and preparing for Christ's coming. Jesus tells his disciples in today's scripture reading that nobody knows the day of his second coming except God. Advent is a time to look ahead to the coming of Jesus as a babe in the manger. It is also a time for looking ahead for the second coming of Christ. Jesus mentions that if the owner of the house knew when the thief was coming in the night, he would be alert, awake and ready at that time to catch the thief. So if we knew an exact day and time that our life would end, would it change what we do each day? Would we prioritize living in God's image each day or still get caught up in daily chaos and stress leading to us cram good deeds in to the last days before we pass on desperate to redeem ourselves?

At our last session meeting, Reverend Yorty reminded all of us that we need to be that beacon of hope during this time of fear and shock from the recent election. With the concern of hasty decisions and inexperience from president elect Trump, our nation is filled with questions and distress and we need to be that beacon of hope and love. We need to be accepting and welcoming and a safety net to ALL people and Advent is the perfect time to commit to being an even more active church to all God's children.

This leads me to another Walt Disney world parallel. I am convinced that every organization, secular or sacred, profit or nonprofit, should have hospitality training with Disney. Every person that works there: from hotel and meal providers, from the characters and the people that guide the group to stand in line to meet them, to the personnel managing rides, from shuttle drivers to people taking out the trash...every single person who works at Disney's primary job is to make people feel welcome, cared for, important, and part of the community while they are there. The other tasks they have been asked to do are secondary. The atmosphere created allows people to relax, be themselves, tend to what they are doing while being changed by the experience. Can you imagine running a community that way? What if every person in a community, from pastors to police officers, from

teachers to CEO's, from musicians to doctors and every other member of a community saw their primary role as one that provided welcome, care and inclusion into what we were doing. Now more than ever we need to embrace this time of waiting and readiness to be alert to the needs of our community and nation. It is a responsibility to be obedient servants to God's call of loving our neighbor as ourselves. This may seem like a large and intimidating task but each one of us has the ability to change lives.

We can each start right now by setting daily patterns of doing small things out of love for others. Raking a neighbor's lawn, dropping a meal off to a family in need, volunteering regularly at St. Luke's Mission of Mercy, spending a few hours each week changing the lives of youth at our ENERGY program, ensuring that Westminster's missions continue by committing to an increased pledge, volunteering to be a Sunday School teacher (which also includes free and unlimited Goldfish crackers), paying for the random car behind you at a toll booth. There are so many more small ways you can brighten and enrich someone else's life. We feel so small yet God chooses us to stand tall and be obedient servants to spread love and faith.

Today's verse and others like it have given rise to what some Christians call The Rapture. But instead of talking about the Rapture, let's focus on the four key points in today's scripture reading. First, Jesus says that He will come again. Second, His coming will be swift and surprising – no warning. Third, upon His return, Christ will divide people into two groups: those who are taken and those who are left behind. Jesus' fourth and final point is this: We need to get READY. We need to STAY ready. We need to LIVE ready. We need to prepare for the time when Jesus will return by prepping this world to love and be at peace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said "A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes...and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent."

Where do we go from here? Do we fall back into the hypnotic, stressful and the energy draining chaos of Cyber Monday deals, Christmas shopping, wrapping presents, holiday parties and decorations? Can we use this time to actively wait for the life giving celebration of Christmas and daily preparation of Christ's coming? Can we make helping others and sharing our faith through actions a daily pattern that occurs all year round and not just near Christmas time? During the great flood in the book of Genesis, people were not ready and were caught off guard. Active waiting, obedience and daily preparation enabled Noah and his family to be saved.

There is no quota of good deeds you need to do. There is no number of loving actions that will give you an express line to Heaven. Do not be the person in the field left behind. Do not be the person grinding meal who looks up to find the other person grinding meal with you has just vanished into thin air. Jesus does not judge us solely by what we do in front of others, but more importantly what we do when no one is looking and when no person will ever know what good deeds you have done. It is our time now to love and be prepared in our daily lives and jobs. So let's learn from Disney World and welcome a chance to stop, recharge and slow down the chaos of everyday life. Let's start making it our daily goal to make others smile and feel good each day. Let's make sure we live to love, comfort, understand and give as God does to each of us every single day. Amen.