December 2, 2012

Expect a Miracle
Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

December 2nd. The First Sunday of Advent. Twenty-three days until Christmas. Are you expecting a miracle?

Right! YOU! Are YOU expecting a miracle? I’d ask for a show of hands, but that might be embarrassing. You probably figure that the answer is supposed to be “yes” but, frankly, that might not be what’s in your heart this morning. But I hope you’ll reconsider before you leave worship today. Because, yes, that’s exactly what Advent is about---refocusing, recalculating (remember the GPS lady?), paying attention. A time of remembering who God is and what God is doing, what God is doing for us. God is doing a new thing, and I bet we’ve gotten out of the habit of paying attention. We’ve forgotten to expect a miracle.

We’re really just exactly like all the believers that have gone before us on this one. We all fall into the same trap of paying attention to the wrong things and squeezing God out of the picture. That’s why we need the season of Advent every single year. It goes back to Pope Gregory the Great who, in the 6th century, set these first four weeks on our Christian calendar as a solemn time of prayer, of repentance, of fasting—a time to prepare our hearts for the “adventus Redemptoris”, Latin for “the coming of the Redeemer”. Sometimes there is great wisdom in the ancient ways of the church. We need this time, each year, to remember. To remember to expect a miracle. Or two or three. Or five thousand…

In the Scripture passage we heard Larry read for us, the prophet Jeremiah was trying to remind the people of Judah that their time of exile will indeed come to an end, or rather that God will bring it to an end. Despite every sign to the contrary, when those exiles were being tempted just to make due and settle down in Babylon, the prophet announces confidently the word of the Lord: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made…in those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” Expect a miracle, Jeremiah is reminding them. Expect a miracle. For our God has promised us this.
And in the Gospel of Luke as well—same idea, different tone of voice. “There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars…the powers of the heavens will be shaken….they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

Expect a miracle, the Gospel reminds us. Expect it, because God is making it happen.

The Advent scriptures are designed to refocus our thoughts, to open up our hearts, to remind us that God is at work in this world, that God has designs for this world, that God is working God’s purposes out—and those have to do with love and justice and salvation and redemption and mercy and compassion and peace. God is doing these things, reminding us that a new world is possible here and now. Expect a miracle. Or two or three or five thousand…

During this Advent season, a great variety of things here in the life of the church are offered to help us remember to expect a miracle. Worship, of course. Tonight’s Christmas Concert. Don’t miss it—it’s a labor of love—thank you Jim and Christoph and choir—and it’s a great gift to our whole community. And another bunch of you has been working hard on the play “Scrooge,” based on Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol.

Written in 1843, Dickens presents Ebenezer Scrooge as the epitome of the ‘economic man,’ the man of commerce whose only goal is personal gain and the amassing of wealth. Casting aside, indeed deriding all considerations of friendship, family, charity, compassion, Scrooge is coldly complacent in the face of the suffering poor, the hungry, the least. Dickens sets out to replace that worldview with one based on love, charity, compassion and mercy. And while none of us may feel as mean and miserly as old Ebenezer Scrooge, Dickens’ hope was to provoke a similar change of heart in us.

I’m sure you know the story. Scrooge is scared out of his wits by visits from the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future. And what he sees awakens him to feelings long forgotten within himself—love of family and friends, compassion for those less fortunate. And when he is finally shown his own grave, and people mocking him at the time of his death, something deep within old Scrooge shifts. A miracle happens. He becomes, in his own words, a baby, a baby full of laughter and love, a baby delighting in family and food shared with friends.

Scrooge changes totally, and “infinitely more,” Dickens writes. Hear our very own Scrooge, David Mayhan, read these concluding paragraphs of the book:

“[Scrooge] became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

….and it was always said of him, that [Scrooge] knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!”

Yes! It’s Advent. Expect a miracle. Or two or three or five thousand. Pay attention and see how God is at work even now within our hearts and in this world. Be a part of the miracle. Make
a few miracles of your own: Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone you need to apologize to? Is God calling you into service or a new work in Christ’s name? Is there someone you should invite to church in this season when many people are searching? Is there someone in your life who needs you to pray for them? Is there a way to spend a little less and give a little more? Might you find some moments, just a few each day, to go quiet, to look at the stars or the moon and remember that God is at work making all things new? Might your heart melt a bit into some greater love and wider compassion, just like Ebenezer Scrooge? Is there a star of hope shining just for you to see?

Expect a miracle. God loves us. God loves this world. And God will fulfill the promise.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given: and the government shall be on his shoulders: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The Creator of the world to come, The Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Notes:

Dennis Walder, Dickens and Religion

Lillian Daniel “Advent and Christmas – Can’t We Do Both?” Call and Response Blog. December 17, 2009

Charles Dickens. A Christmas Carol. 1843.