

Several months ago each of the 4 regions of the United Methodist Church in Wisconsin received the news that the bishop of our Wisconsin Conference, Linda Lee, was coming to visit them in their area. Periodically, the churches would get reminder e-mails from the Conference office about this visit. --Not only that, in our region we were given a choice of two different sites at which we could meet the bishop. And we found out that one of the communities the bishop was coming to was Marshfield, something I was happy about because it would only be a short jaunt to get to Zion UMC where she would be speaking. And along with this, the pastors were asked to invite members of their congregations to attend and to let the host church know the numbers, so that the host church could prepare appropriately not only for the Bishop and her team, but for everyone else who'd be coming.

So when the Bishop came, there was no mystery about it. We knew how to prepare because we knew who was coming, and when and where she would be coming. We also knew why she was coming: to help us recognize the blessings of the giving that we do, through her message entitled: “Give Wholeheartedly.”

As we approach the end of the Christian church year which is actually next Sunday, we see again in Luke's Gospel the theme of end times. Last Sunday this took the form of the question about the resurrection from the dead. In today's lesson, Jesus is talking to his disciples about an end time that will be coming soon—an end time of great social, political, religious, and planetary stress. In v. 5 it says that “some,” perhaps some of the disciples, were looking at the Jerusalem temple, amazed at how beautiful and impressive it looked. To which Jesus replies: “**All this you see—the time will come when not a single stone here will be left in its place.**” Jesus then goes on to describe a series of events that would be *signs* indicating that this endpoint event would soon happen. And the signs would be these: people claiming to have the inside track on when the end will come; wars, uprisings, earthquakes, epidemics, strange celestial events, persecution, fear of not knowing what to say when brought before authorities, betrayal by one's closest relatives, and being hated. Ultimately—all these things came to pass when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in about 70 A.D.

In our own day and age we have people called *futurologists*. Here we are not so much talking about people like Jean Dixon, the clairvoyant, or Tim LeHaye with his “Left Behind” series, but we are talking about people who have made a study of human history and human behavior, and based on these two things, make projections about the future history of humankind. And for the most part they sense that ahead of us is an increase in suffering in our world at the end of human history.

However, the reality is that there's much that we don't know about the end times or Jesus' second coming at the end of time. But the Good News is that we know our Lord will come again, because he has promised to do so. In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of his triumphant return in these words: “**When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.**” At that time God will make the final judgment on human behavior. And in John's Gospel, we hear Jesus speak these comforting words to his followers: “**In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.**”

Ultimately time and history are in God's hands, for God is the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. And just as God was present and ruling at the beginning of human history, so God will be present and ruling at the end of history. And so the question for us who are living between the beginning and the end is this: *How then shall we live?* And the answer, very simply, is that we want to live our lives as if Jesus were coming back tomorrow. In fact, as the end of the Christian year meets the beginning of the new Christian year with Advent, there is a common theme that connects them, which has two parts: “**Be ready, keep occupied.**”

A. The first part for us--**being ready**--includes these things - 1. Nurturing our spirit--Regularly take the opportunity to be in worship, in individual and family prayer, Bible study, Holy Communion, and Christian fellowship, where you can share your faith journey as a believer in Christ. 2. Nurturing our body--Care for your body through a healthy diet, exercise and rest. Care for your body as if it were God's temple, because it is. 3. And seeking a healthy emotional life--if depression or anxiety is a part of your life, or if you have situations in your work life or family life that are highly stressful and make it difficult to stay emotionally healthy, seek help, because help is available.

B. And the second part for us--**keeping occupied**--includes these things - 1. **First**, take every opportunity to do good in the form of random and planned acts of kindness. Mend broken relationships. Help those in need. See your giving of whatever kind as a way to change the world for the better, because everything we do has a ripple effect. Near the end of Charles Dickens' story about Ebenezer Scrooge, Ebenezer meets the third angel who directs him to look to the future. And what Ebenezer comes to realize is that part of the future is in his own hands, and that he has a choice in how he will live in the future. Will he continue the behavior pattern he's been in, or will he change course and let himself be transformed by the spirit of generosity. Well, Ebenezer chooses the latter, and the bleak future that might have been, becomes a future in which Tiny Tim lives.

2. And **secondly**: Take every opportunity you have to invite people to know Jesus. There's a painting by Matthias Grunewald in which John the Baptist is pointing, with what seems to be an extra long finger, to the cross of Jesus in the center of the painting. After looking at this painting a well-known theologian said: “I want to be that finger.” And so do we! We want to point people to Jesus, too, because we are people of the Book--the Scriptures--and we know how the story ends. We know the life and victory that Jesus has won for us. And we want others to know it as well.

Our Lord is coming. He will come at the end of time. He will come again to us as we welcome him as the babe in Bethlehem. So let's be ready, and let's keep occupied for our Lord is coming soon. Amen.