

Scrooge's First Name **Isaiah 64:1-4; Mark 13:24-27, 32-37**
St Marks UMC, Charleston, WV 1st Sunday of Advent (November 30,) 2014

Isaiah 64:1-4

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence ² as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³ When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴ From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.

Mark 13:24-27, 32-37

²⁴ "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

³² "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

It's here, once more. ADVENT – the season of preparation for Christmas. It's a time like no other, in the whole year. Merchants are certainly hoping so. We've already been through Black Friday – you know that special one day a year – it comes the day after we give thanks for all that we have, and then we go out looking to buy so much more than all that we already have.

Advent is that time of year when the **world goes one way** and the **church goes another**, as we head toward that destination called CHRISTMAS.

For this first Sunday of Advent, our watchword is **HOPE**. The sermons during these Sundays of Advent will be ACROSTIC. That's a big word for a very simple concept: We will take THE WORD of the Sunday, and use each letter to make a point of emphasis.

Today's word is **H O P E**.

H is for **HIGH, like HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

O is for **OPEN like in GOD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS**

P is for **PREPARATION**

E is for ... well, **we'll get to E later.**

H – HIGH – these are **our expectations**, yes?

Children, at this time, have already developed their HIGH expectations of what they hope to see under the Christmas tree. I still remember what it was like for me, as a child. Things have changed a lot in the years that have gone by since then. But children still have high expectations.

I've also learned in the years that have elapsed since I was a child, that **children are also in the process of developing HIGH EXPECTATIONS of what the season should be.** Children are unintentionally learning what to expect of this season – HIGH EXPECTATIONS that will be hard to change. Let Jane or me try to change up how the season's celebration should be done and what a HOWL we will hear from our adult children with children of their own. They have learned certain traditions and they will expect them to be carried out; they will expect to carry them out with their children; and when their spouse brings different HIGH EXPECTATIONS into the marriage – because their family did it differently -- this can be one of the sources of tensions in a new marriage.

Perhaps at this time more than any other the children are watching the big people, and learning (unconsciously and unintentionally) what are the HIGH EXPECTATIONS of this season.

Parents, also, have HIGH EXPECTATIONS. Parents want their children to be happy. Parents will go to all kinds of lengths to “make Christmas successful.” I remember the year, back in the early 1980's – I think it was 1983 – when the American marketing phenomenon of PLANNED SHORTAGE was introduced. It worked like this: advertise one particular product very much and then don't make enough of it. It will create a frenzy of desire that will live even past Christmas, when you flood the market with the product then. How many of you remember what was the children's present that made so many Americans absolutely FRENETIC?

Yep, **CABBAGE PATCH DOLLS**. Parents paid twice the asking price in order to get one – to be able to live up to their child’s expectations.

Grandparents have HIGH EXPECTATIONS – of just being able to see their grandchildren.

Pastors have

- HIGH EXPECTATIONS that people will know the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love of Advent;
- HIGH EXPECTATIONS will take time to be holy;
- HIGH EXPECTATIONS that people will put aside everything else to show up for Church Stuff; and
- HIGH EXPECTATIONS that everything depends on them to make the whole congregation get ready for the holiest Christmas ever.

Pastors are like other people inside and outside the church that set themselves up for disappointment and feelings of failure because of their HIGH EXPECTATIONS for themselves.

Perhaps it is in response to HIGH EXPECTATIONS that we realize the need for the second letter: **O for – as Isaiah put it – a prayer that God would TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS and come down.**

O, yes, we need a little Christmas, right this very minute. We need you O God, to tear open the heavens and come down. Stop us from the madness of our HIGH EXPECTATIONS and save us.

We pray for God to OPEN the heavens and come down. And we actually mean it, we think. But it’s a prayer that we throw upward, as we rush forward to the next important task on our next letter of the HOPE alphabet: P

P is for prepare.

The P for PREPARE actually comes from the Gospel lesson. But, the **Gospel lesson is a bit different** from the PREPARATION that we do, because in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is talking about the Day of the Lord, **the date of which is uncertain**.

What's different is that we KNOW when is the GOAL LINE of our Preparation. It's December 24/25. We KNOW how many shopping days we have left.

We are on a time line of preparation. In fact, in order to make it in the midst of all the P is for PRESSURE, as well, we have made little KNOWN GOAL LINES in the middle. For Monty and Jane, a BIG little GOAL POST is next Sunday – December 7. The **OPEN HOUSE** – the day when we open the house and ask that everyone from the Church will show up, for food, fellowship, and all the decorations must be up. (We have cut back – this year there are only 12 Christmas trees.

But that's **not the kind of PREPRATION that Jesus is talking about**. **He's talking about being PREPARED and not knowing when to expect God's heaven opening intervention**. One year, our Open House was on Saturday, not Sunday. Jane and I were patting ourselves on the back as to how well we had done this year. It was still 4 hours until the open house began, and we were all done. We had really pulled it off.

Then, reveling in just how good I was, I stood on the front porch and watched our daughter take a sled ride down the hill and suddenly did not come up from the descent as expected. She ran into a tree and did not do anything but just lie crumpled on the non-moving sled. I ran down the hill, scooped her into my arms, ran up the hill and took her to the Emergency Room.

That's the kind of preparation that Jesus is talking about – being PREPARED for the interruption from the normal HIGH EXPECTATIONS.

It's being PREPARED for God tearing open the heavens and coming down among us for something not on our schedule.

Sometimes, we are so locked into our HIGH EXPECTATIONS, so busy in PREPARATION for our agendas, that we don't even notice when God TEARS OPEN the heavens and comes down in our midst.

And so, there is the **E** of our HOPE acrostic – it's the sermon title: **Scrooge's first name – EBENEZER.**

Do you know from whence the name EBENEZER comes? If you look at Hymn #400 in your Red UMHymnal (Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing) you will see in verse #2 these words:

“Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I've come, and I hope,
by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.”

And, then, if you look down into the lower left hand corner, where is written the name of the author of the words (on top) and the music (below) you will find the reference to 1 Samuel 7:12.

And if you read that First Testament reference, you will see where the prophet Samuel erected a large stone in the midst of the Hebrews, and called it an EBENEZER stone.

The purpose of the EBENEZER was to remind people of the time when God turned their fortunes around – when God gave them a fresh start – when God overcame their fears and provided them HOPE.

The book, play, television show “Scrooge” has become, indeed, an Ebenezer in the midst of a culture – in Dickens' time, and in our own -- when we need reminded to get off the endless escalator, the never stopping treadmill – and **to remember what God has done, and to expect a fresh start that comes not from our own efforts.**

Let me suggest that you consciously and regularly make your CHRISTMAS TREE or perhaps a CANDLE or something that is a constant in our life during this season to be your EBENEZER ... to DAILY stop in front of it and use it as a

REMINDER: to take time away from your HIGH EXPECTATIONS to allow GOD to open heaven and allow you to see the Unexpected, i.e.

We have HOPE because at Christmas, God became human so that we can become divine -- as God intended.

Take a regular, daily break, to stop by your Advent Ebenezer and **allow God to bless you**. And may that blessing be as bold as expressed by the Celtic mystic John O'Donohue put it:

May you recognize in your life the Presence and Power and Light of your soul.

May you realize that you are never alone, but that your soul, in its brightness and belonging, connects you intimately with the Rhythm of the Universe.

May you have respect for your own individuality and difference, and may you realize that the shape of your soul is unique; that you have a special destiny here, and that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful and good and eternal living in you.

May you learn to see yourself with the same delight and pride and happiness with which God sees you in every moment.

We have HOPE because at Christmas, God became human so that we can become divine -- as God intended.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.