

Good Morning and welcome to the First Sunday of Advent. This is also the first Sunday of the Christkindmarkets but they've been open since Friday. This is the first day of the Church year that turns in an endless circle from the anticipation of the birth of Christ to Christ the King Sunday which was last week and is the great summary of Christ's life, death, mission, and resurrection. Every year, our readings from the Bible are set up to slowly tell the story of how Jesus changed the world.

In the world, time keeps going forward. One year we're ten years old and another year we are 55 years old and we never go back to being ten again, except in our memories.

In the Church world, we chose to measure time with a single year that keep telling and retelling the story of Jesus Christ at work in the world. This Sunday is the Sunday we begin telling our story all over again. We know what is coming but we still don't know. This Sunday we start with the knowing that something is going to happen - but what?

Well, a baby is coming.

A very unusual baby, one we've never seen before. So unusual we can't even imagine what to expect.

A baby? Thousands of babies are born everywhere all the time. What's such a big deal about that?

We're not sure. But what we do know this morning is that change is coming. Big change. So we need to sit up, get ready, and open up our hearts and our eyes to see something that is outside of everything we think we know about how the world works.

Its hard to be that ready, especially all the time. We still have a life to live in the meantime. Groceries to shop for, kids to get ready for school, work. Appointments with the authorities to get our papers in order, feasts and festivities to sew for, to cook for, to dance at. Its easy to get caught up in our day to day life and think, well, this is what there is. This is my life now and maybe its not the best life but it is a good enough life. I know what to expect from it. I know how to survive in this life I now have. I know what people expect from me. So we run our daily pattern of bus or tram, work place and then home again.

But we belong to a God who does not do the expected thing.

We belong to a God who comes at us from unexpected directions, like that thief in the night. We don't see God coming until suddenly God is here and everything is different.

This is what drove the authorities and the disciples so crazy about Jesus. He kept sneaking up on them. He talked to strange women when no one who was at all proper, even looked at a woman. He ate food that came from who knows where at a time when the good people made a point of never eating anything that had been offered up at a roman temple first. Jesus said, hospitality is more important the purity. Jesus said, community is more important then honor. Jesus said wealth is for everyone and the hungry need to eat. Jesus said everyone belongs to God now. Everyone is a beloved child of God. And then Jesus said we don't have to be on our best behavior all the time so we can earn God's love. We can't earn God's love. We can't make God do anything and we can't make God not do anything. If God choses to love, then God loves.

Isn't that unexpected?

We live in a world where - I think we think we have to earn our love. We have to be good students, good workers, good children, good wives and husbands so we can be loved and respected. We tell each other all the time - leave the lying no good layabout. He or she doesn't deserve your love...

But Jesus is going to tell us that we can't be thrown out of God's love.

God does not love as the world loves.

God loves in ways we do not expect. Beyond our imagination even. But we don't know that yet. We still think we have to do the work to earn God's love. Its only the first Sunday of Advent. The Church year has turned, We start our story all over again and we don't know what is coming.

The shepherds are out in the fields with their sheep. Its just an ordinary week. A little rain, a little cool, but no wolves or sheep thieves at the moment. Many of the Ewes, the female sheep, are pregnant but the lambing season hasn't yet started. The shepherds are peasants, farmers with a small piece of land. They keep sheep on the side to raise enough money and food so they can stay alive another year. The Roman tax is heavy on them, so heavy that they dream of being able to afford the fees being charged at the temple for worship and atonement. They have no idea that in about four weeks their nightly vigil will be shattered forever with the impossible - Angels, singing Glory to God on High. Angels telling these people who live on the margins of society that the messiah has been born. Angels who come to the Shepherds first with the good news and not to the rich or the powerful. Can you imagine this? I don't think the Shepherds can. They are just keeping themselves busy tending sheep this afternoon.

They have no idea of how God is going to break in on them because we are all only at the beginning of this story - this morning.

What we do know is that the shepherds need to keep watch for the unexpected. We know we need to keep watch too.

And then, perhaps in the village nearby, there is Mary. Is she a teen? Is she a young woman? We don't know exactly because the stories don't tell us. All we know is that she is engaged to a man called Joseph and that she has a radically unexpected encounter with the Angel Gabriel. Right now she may be making bread or collecting water and firewood. She might be daydreaming about Joseph, wondering what kind of a husband he will be or she may be actually dreading the upcoming wedding. My guess is that she did not fear Joseph, but she might not have been ready for the change yet. Little does she know of the larger change that is about to take place. The biggest change of all - God who is about to take human material and initiate a startling mixture of divine and human: a baby. As if entering into human experience wasn't unexpected enough. The unlimited, all powerful God comes to us as a helpless baby who needs other people to keep him clean, fed, and warm. Of all the unexpected stories we're about to tell again this coming Church year, this is the second most unexpected.

The first most unexpected is what happens when Jesus is killed by the Romans but we'll take a few months before we get to that impossible story.

Right now, we are all at the very beginning of all these stories and we know nothing except to keep watch for the unexpected. Who can imagine visits from angels announcing new life, not just any life? Who can expect wise men with gifts in the middle of the night? Who can expect kings who would slaughter children just to keep his throne?

Keep Watch. Be ready.

Outside the doors of this building are Christkindmarkets full of everything we need to get ready for Christmas. Gifts, food, lights. The stores are overflowing with decorations, special christmas table settings, lights, and lawn decorations - Garden sparkles and inflatables. The bakeries have all kinds of Christmas treats and the butchers have beef, pork, and chicken roasts set up for your feast. We're busy in our own kitchens making up Gari Bisquits and all the FuFu we're going to need come Christmas day. We're getting ready - but we're getting ready for the expected.

The world's Christmas is an expected event. It happens every year and it happens in certain ways - ways that often reward the rich who sell the goods and the dreams set out in all those booths on the market squares. I looked for some figures on how much money passed through all these beautiful market stalls - in 2009 it was about 175 billion euros. In Munich alone. That's a lot of glühwein and candles.

If all we had was the world's Christmas I would think we'd be in despair because we'd not see any hope for the future. We'd not anticipate the kind of change that God has promised where the hungry are fed and the homeless have shelter. Like the shepherds on the hillsides, we'd only see the same old same old with no hope for change.

But we have the church year and we have these stories to remind us that God is still out there among the unexpected. We know there's more than one story about our fate in this world. We know we belong to the God who is still at work, who is still telling us the stories, the God who asks us to keep watch.

We are in unsettling times. We are living in unexpected events. 2016 has been a wild ride and what we thought we knew about how the world works has been challenged. The community of Europeans was deeply disrupted by the the Brexit vote that passed unexpectedly.

Even the people promoting the vote didn't expect it to pass. And now we're in a place we didn't expect to be, trying to dis-entangle our connections to each other. I'm not sure that God is done here however. Keep watch.

And then there's the elections in my own home country earlier this month. We discovered that we are not as united as we had thought. The unexpected candidate won, perhaps because we had lost track of how deep the suffering runs for many families and rural communities. Now we watch the president-elect form his governing team and know that here too we must keep expecting the unexpected. We must keep watch, not only to see who is chosen but to also see how that anger and fear which is sometimes expressed as racism and religious bigotry can be answered with God's love.

Fidel Castro just died, earthquakes swarm all around the Pacific ocean, drought and floods roam the wind, and Russia rattles her swords and fires up her fighter jet engines for sweeping provocative testing of borders and boundaries. The land that ISIS would have held, along with Syria, is reduced to rubble, smoke and ashes. Innocent families, bystanders who were just trying to make a life are now on the run or slowly reclaiming homes and work places.

The unexpected is on the loose my friends and I'm not sure that 2017 will be any more settled than 2016. These are unexpected times.

Even so, the good news is that God is with us in all of this. God lives in the unexpected and is at work for healing and restoration. We know this because we've been telling ourselves the stories of the Church year for decades and centuries now. We know how this Church year is going to go. A baby will be born, his family will run to Egypt for protection and then return. Eventually the baby will create wine out of water at a wedding and then start teaching, healing, and announcing the end of death. We know this because we've heard the stories before and we're going to hear them all again and again and again.

God is at work in the chaos.

Keep watch, "the night is far gone and the day is near," Paul tells us.

Amazing things are coming. Events beyond our wildest imagination because it is God who is in charge of this world and it is God who loves us and wishes only the best for all of us.

Keep Watch for the Love of God.

Keep listening for the Story of God at work in the world because that story is still be being told and ... unexpectedly perhaps - we are a part of its telling. Our lives, our actions, our choices are a part of God's story, a part of God at work.

Keep listening, keep watching, and keep working.

and Let the people say....