

2 Peter 3:8-15

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him,

“The Innkeeper Forgot To Look”

Rev. Charles Schuster

December 4, 2011

The reading this morning is about the second coming of Jesus. The early church believed that you had the birth of Jesus, and you had the life of Jesus, and then the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the early church believe the second coming of Jesus, and that actually is a part of how we look at the season of Advent. Not just the birth of the baby, but the coming of the Lord in a variety of different ways, and here we are in the second week of it. Christmas comes and it's going to be here, and we're going to miss it, and we're going to feel guilty if we do. Let's just get that said. Sometimes it is when we think we know something best, it is that we really truly know something least.

Like the couple at the craft store. They were looking at the display of country-style musical instruments, flutes and dulcimers and recorders, and he picked up a stringed instrument which he thought was a mouth-harp, and he put it to his lips and he twanged a few notes, and the people at the store stopped what they were doing and looked at him, sort of amazed, as his wife walked over to him and said to him, "I hate to tell you, Sweetheart, but you're trying to play a cheese slicer." What we think we know best is sometimes what we know least.

There's the report that comes from the Nevada Highway Department, that I think describes something important for us. They wrote a paper on the absolute danger of speeding, and they're right. Absolutely right, and in order to make the point, they conclude this essay, "At a hundred miles per hour, if you're in a car and your speedometer registers a hundred miles an hour, you're not driving the car, you're aiming it." And we could proceed to think about how fast we drive. I don't know about you, but I'm driving faster than I should, and that by itself is helpful. Slow down. And what is happening to us now, this second week of Advent, picking up speed. It's not so much that we're moving toward Christmas as that we're aiming at it. And Grace Hittle has loaned us her Christmas

creches. You want to go out the door after the service, to the east there, you'll see those beautiful creches on display. You'll see Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the wise men, you'll see sheep and goats and cows and you'll see Jesus, or as one six-year-old said, you'll see Jesus in his car seat, and you can see why.

James Harnish, a United Methodist pastor in Florida, tells a story of two boys in New York City walking down Fifth Avenue at Christmas time. One of them going to the synagogue, the other one going straight to Saint Patrick's Cathedral. The Jewish boy, with a measure of pride, announced, "Of course you know, don't you, that Jesus was a Jew." And the other boy announced, "Yes, I know that. But his mother was Catholic." Now, I've actually told that here before, and I've got a sequel to that. I'd like to add, I don't know for sure, but I think his father was Methodist, because he didn't have a clue.

We sort of aim at Christmas, moving at high speed, like Joseph without a clue, and the Scripture says it comes to us like a thief in the night. Or, as the three-year-old said, as she looked at the calendar and asked, "How many be-good days are there left?" till Christmas. We don't get it right. We miss it because we're too busy. It's a crazy time, it's there, it's always been. I love the writings of Will Durant. He's written this series of the history of civilization. He's got a chapter on Christ and Caesar. He describes the time in which Jesus lived, in which he was born, and you can see it, you can hear it. At the time, Rome was full of men and women who had lost their economic footing and their moral stability. Soldiers who had tasted adventure. Citizens who had seen their savings consumed in taxes and the inflation of war.

Edward Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. You would see the same kind of environment. There's no peace of mind. There was the force of power, no peace of mind. Christmas, that first Christmas, it came like a thief in the night. The innkeeper, the guilt of not getting it. Just to give you some sense of what that time was like, there is a legend, you may have heard it. There's a story about Roman power and Jewish fear, about the fugitive on the run. He comes into the city, asks for asylum in the Temple, and the Romans know where he is, and the captain of the guard calls all the people to the town square and announces, "If that fugitive escapee is not turned over to us by sunup the next day, all the young men of this town will be taken out and executed." So the leaders of the town went to the rabbi. "What should we do?" And the rabbi said he would consult holy Scripture. He said he would have his answer by daybreak in the morning, so that night the old rabbi pored over the Bible and he found this passage, which said, "It is better that one man die so that all the people could be saved." That was his answer. He called the people together. He gave them the verdict. The Scripture says, it is better that one man die so that all the people can be saved, and the people were filled with joy. And the rabbi saved the village and the fugitive was turned over to the Romans, and the fugitive was executed and the people celebrated. The decision was made to save the village. But the old rabbi could not celebrate. There was something deeply troubling him. At midnight the next night he was visited by an angel who said to him, "Rabbi, what have you done?" "I have read the sacred Scripture. I have done as I was told. It is better that one man die so that the people may be saved." And the angel stared at the old rabbi and said, "You surrendered the Messiah. The Messiah of Israel is dead because of you." and

the old rabbi said, "How was I to know it was the Messiah?" and the angel of the Lord said, "If you had put down your Bible and taken the time and trouble to look at the young man eye-to-eye, you would have known he was the Messiah."

He didn't get it, and he felt guilt, of course. Guilt comes to us, like the innkeeper. "How was I to know? The inn was full. They came for the census, the rich and the rabble, and the couple. The couple, how was I to know? They were a peasant couple. He was a working sort of man, older, perhaps. She was young. They had no servants. Some say there were lights in the sky. I had no time to see the lights. They say there were angel voices. I didn't hear any voices. How was I to know? It came like a thief in the night. I didn't get it. The guilt of not getting it, the guilt of the season, the tasks that go undone, the times we fail to look eye-to-eye so we don't see each other face-to-face. The times we hear the voice of the carols and miss the message that they offer.

Friday I got a visit from two Mormons, here at the church. They weren't young men on bicycles. They were old men in cars, and they set up an appointment, and they came to the office, here at the church, and I offered them coffee. They don't drink it. They told me they had both been bishops. I said, "I hate bishops." Actually, I wasn't that strong. (So don't call her, please.) They said they though Mormons were misunderstood, and I told them I thought Methodists were not well regarded either. They wanted to know if I had any questions or complaints, and they invited me to visit their temple. They're going to build one. It will be done in three years. They would give me a tour. I gave them a tour through our temple. I told them I had one complaint. They got very quiet. I said, "Sometimes, when I'm sitting in my office in the middle of the summer, and it's hot, or when there is snow on the ground in the winter, like today, this is Friday, and my office is so comfortable, and I'm reading a book, about Jesus or God, and I look out that window, past the Columbarium on the east side, and I see two of your young Mormons on bicycles, wearing those backpacks, out there going door to door, it is disturbing to me, because I cannot do that. Those young people on those bicycles are doing what they do, and they make me feel guilty because I'm not going to do that. Could you keep your missionaries away from the east side of the building here? Especially, could you do that between now and Christmas?"

I'm not proud of that, but I couldn't take Jesus door-to-door like they do. I admire them for doing it, but I'm not going to do it, and I feel guilty. Three weeks ago we were in Wheatridge, Colorado. I was getting gasoline at a service station in Wheatridge. The United Methodist church is right behind the gas station. This young woman, her car had the hood up, she walked over to me. She wanted to know if I had cables. She said that her car battery was dead and could I use my cables to jump-start her car. I could have done it, I have cables, I know how to do that. But you know what I did? I told her she ought to go right there to that Methodist church and she out to ask for Rev. Aaron Gray and he would help her. I'm not proud of that. What if she'd have been Jesus? What if she'd have been Methodist? What if she'd have been somebody. Well, she was somebody, and I feel guilt, like the rabbi who wouldn't look the fugitive eye-to-eye or the innkeeper who put the holy family in the barn and the baby was born and put into a trough for cattle. The child

born, and we'd miss it, I'd miss it. The guilt, that we aim at Christmas and we miss it, while there's the guilt of Christmas, it's there, because we don't get it.

Secondly, there's, fortunately, the grace of Christmas peace. It comes to us like the song in the air of the first Noel. The music plays it. Music - Victor Hugo was the one who said music attempts to express what cannot be said about something on which it is impossible to remain silent. Ever wonder what happened to the innkeeper who knew the guilt of that Christmas, first Christmas? Some have pondered that. Here's what I think. It could be, I can't prove it, can't disprove it either, the innkeeper, I know he knew what he had done. He had the holy family. He put them in a barn or a cave, behind the inn. He would go down in history as the man who didn't give the Messiah a room, or the time of day. He would go down to the end of time in the record book as the one who could have done it right, but he did it wrong. Could have kicked somebody out of a room, could have put the couple there. He did it, and how did he feel? Well, I know how he felt. He missed the field goal. There was a safety at the end of the game, oh for goodness sake, come on Rams. Or you put salt in the Christmas cookies when the recipe calls for sugar, or you make a gaff at the staff Christmas party and three people put their coats on and leave.

There are consequences, but there's grace, because the God we have is about forgiving, not holding grudges or keeping score. See, our God is not a God who keeps score of our mistakes. Our God is a God who gives us grace to get over them, and chances to get it right. Second chances. So the innkeeper, my theory, and his brother, and their wives, franchised their business. They built a string of bed-and-breakfast inns all over Jericho, and they made a lot of money, and then the dream house in Jerusalem, the innkeeper had it all. But in the back of his mind, as it sometimes is with us, just knows there was something wrong. Guilt of Christmas that he missed the first Noel. Thirty-three years after that first Noel, the innkeeper, maybe the same one, one day they came, two of them, they said, "Jesus has sent us, we need a room. Jesus sent us, Christ sent us, could we use your room. Could we use your upper room." You know, it happens like that sometimes, we call it the grace of God. In the middle of our worst day, something breaks in on us and wakes us up and warms our heart. In a time when we're wailing on ourselves, we feel a pat on the back, and it's God. On the dark day when it's cold and our heart is breaking, we discover why the word became flesh - so that flesh could welcome the word. So that Christmas could become a way of life. So that the peace of Christmas could infuse a troubled soul. So that grace could confront guilt, and we would know that, "So, we missed it the first time. Still, there's time. Let's see if we can get it right this time." But you know, life is like that. When we make a mistake, we have chances to make it right. When we're feeling down on ourselves, there are things that remind us to look up, and they happen.

Michael Yaconelli, public speaker, author, his book *Messy Spirituality*, he died a few years ago, a very great loss. He tells us, "I just finished speaking to a church retreat in some faraway town back East, and I had three sessions with them, pleading with the congregation to bring their busy lopsided lives to Jesus. As soon as the last meeting was over, I raced to the airport to catch my plane, and it was delayed. It's near Christmas, and I collapsed emotionally. I was struck by all that had happened, and there I was in a

crowded, noisy airport, and I wanted to be home with my wife, and I was imprisoned by guilt for abandoning her, for speaking too much. Why do I take so many of these? You name it, I felt guilty about it, I was depressed and angry and I didn't have the spiritual resources to deal with it. And then it occurred to me - I'm going to call my son and daughter-in-law, and I'm going to talk to my two-year-old grandson. I called, and the little boy answered the phone. He does that now. "Hello, Noah," I said, and he mumbled something. I couldn't hear what he said. Life is cruel, you know? Children just learning how to speak should not be talking to old people who are losing their hearing. And at my age, little children's voices are the voices I most need to hear. "Are you playing with Dada? Are you playing with your train?" and he said something. I didn't understand what he said. Silence, breathing. Not only was I delayed from getting home, I was now an inadequate grandfather. When my grandson spoke, it was so soft I couldn't hear him. My ears are going. When I spoke, he didn't know what to say. My gloomy disposition got gloomier, and he mumbled and I couldn't hear him. Finally, I just said, "Could I speak to your Daddy, Noah?" There was silence, absolute silence. I could just picture him holding the phone with his mouth open. I was just about to hang up, when that tiny voice spoke as clearly as any voice I've ever heard, and I heard him say to me, just so clearly, "I love you, Grandpa." My eyes filled with tears and they wouldn't stop, and my gloom disappeared, my frustration vanished, and the dark receded, and the light filled my soul. My grandson had spoken the only words my too-busy life needed to hear. With those four words, he helped me put into perspective the delayed flight, the bad hearing, the increased anxiety, my guilt, my lopsided schedule. "I love you, Grandpa," was all I needed to hear."

That is the grace of God. It makes disappointments turn into opportunities. It makes sin yield to a second chance. It makes death and its sting softened by life and its resilience. It makes guilt yield to forgiveness, and then that gives way to grace. It's Christmas peace. The peace of Christmas turns grief into gratitude. It turns guilt into grace. And that innkeeper, that upper room owner, he may have missed the first Christmas, but he, I think, or someone like him, got the Last Supper, standing in the doorway, watching Jesus break the bread. "My body, broken for you." Watching Jesus take the cup. "My blood, poured out for the forgiveness of many." The upper room owner, the innkeeper, the same perhaps. The guilt. I believe he was invited to come to the table. I believe Jesus took him in and said to him the only words that could cure him, and can cure us. "I love you, Grandpa." "I love you, Grandma." "I love you, Sir. I love you, Miss. I love you, little girl. I love you, little boy. God loves you. So do I."

This past week, I had a meeting in town. We were discussing big things, you know, and we were asked before the meeting started to introduce ourselves. My good friend, Rich McDermott, who is pastor at First Presbyterian Church, he said, "I'm Rich. I'm senior pastor at First Pres." My turn next, I said, "I'm not rich, I'm Chuck. My bosses are at First Methodist." But I am rich. We are all rich, by the grace of God. So, what we have is Christmas that comes like a thief in the night, and like the innkeeper, we could miss it. Or the upper room owner, we could get it. Filled with guilt, forgiven by grace, at the table with Christ and a God who, like Hallmark, cared enough to send the very best. There was, and there is, if we hear it, a song in the air.

