

"LIVING WITH ACHES AND ALLELUIAS"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

She had every reason to be bitter. Though talented, she went unrecognized for years. Prestigious opera circles closed their ranks when she tried to enter. American critics ignored her compelling voice. She was rejected repeatedly for parts for which she was easily qualified. It was only after she went to Europe and won the hearts of tough-to-please European audiences that opinion leaders in this country came to acknowledge her marvellous talent. Let me tell you more about her.

"Not only has her professional life been a battle, but also her personal life has been marked by challenge. She is the mother of two handicapped children, one of whom is severely retarded. Years ago, in order to escape the pace of New York City, she purchased a home on Martha's Vineyard. It burned to the ground two days before she was to move in."

Professional rejection. Personal setbacks. Perfect soil for the seeds of bitterness. A receptive field for the roots of resentment, but in this case, anger found no home. "Her friends don't call her bitter. They call her Bubbles". Who is she? Any idea. Raise a hand if you know. Yes, Beverly Sills. The internationally acclaimed opera singer and retired Director of the New York Opera.

"Her phrases are sugared with laughter. Her face is softened with serenity. Upon interviewing her, Mike Wallace (60 Minutes) stated that 'she is one of the most impressive - if not the most impressive - ladies I have ever interviewed."

One wonders.....one asks...how can a person handle such professional rejection and personal trauma and still be known as Bubbles? She says,

"I choose to be cheerful. Years ago, I knew I had little or no choice about success, circumstances, or even happiness. But I knew I could choose to be cheerful."

### DEVELOPMENT

A retired Bishop of our United Methodist Church once said,

"If you are at the stage of life or age of life when your back goes out more than you do, do not let your aches get in the way of your alleluias."

And that's a good message for us today as we enter into this Advent Season.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, in his best-selling book, The Road Less Traveled, begins with the statement, "Life is difficult". And then in a sequel to that book, he begins by saying, "Life is complex". Both statements are, of course, quite true. Life is both difficult and complex, but Advent season is a season of hope. Long ago, Isaiah, cried out to God, "O that Thou would rend the heavens and come down". We affirm during this season of the year the most basic teaching of our faith - that God has come down to us in the person of Christ, that the Word has become incarnate and now life does not seem as daunting or as frightening, or as dreary or as gray.

Today we open the Advent Season that leads us to the celebration of the birth of Christ. We prepare the "way" for the Lord to enter our hearts more deeply and this is why we do not lose heart or hope. This is why our aches do not drown out our alleluias - because our God has come to us. He comes to us to change our lives from chaos to completion.

Our lesson from Mark's Gospel deals with that event that shall herald the end of history, what we in the church call the Second Coming of Christ. The Biblical description of that final victory of good over evil, of light over darkness, of love over hatred is both vivid and disturbing. Yet the Second Coming of Christ will be no more dramatic in its consequences for humankind than His First Coming and the power of His first coming, dear friends, is still resonating in the world today. Jesus has already taught us not to speculate as to when that day will be. Some like too. To me, there are far more important issues at hand and I'd like to consider some of those important issues for a few moments.

GET ON LIVING WITH OUR LIVES

First, Christ tells us to get on with living our lives for God in the present moments.

Today's Gospel lesson assures us that history will find its completion in Christ. We are invited to watch while history works its relentless way toward God's intention. History is not a blind force or an act of sheer power. There is power and there is purpose at work. This I believe with all of my being. We saw this in the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, in the end of apartheid in South Africa and the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union. The power behind this universe is a power that disrupts and heals. God is at work. God is at work - now. The Second Coming of Christ will one day bring it to completion. In the meantime, let us not live in a paralyzed state wondering, "When will it be? When will He come?" We are to go on with our lives and live life to its fullest.

Is it the Pepsi commercial featuring the music of Ray Charles as he sings the song, "You Got the Right One...Baby"? As far as mothers go, Ray Charles, I believe, certainly had the right one...baby! As some of you know, Ray Charles went blind during his childhood. His blindness could have caused him to endure a life of defeat and of self-pity. It was his mother who said to him, "Ray... you might have lost your eyes...but not your mind!" And she encouraged him and at times she forced him to be all he could be.

He was to focus not on being a victim of life's hardness and unfairness, but to rise above it all and become a victor. And this is exactly what the power of God can do in the life of one who makes a commitment to Christ. Our faith enables us to walk "through the valley" of those dark and disturbing experiences, not to camp out for the rest of our life in the place of despair and fear.

One woman put it this way...saying that "many Christians count their blessings on their fingertips...but count their burdens on their pocket calculators."

Focus on life now. The spirit of Christ is alive and well on planet earth in the person of God's Holy Spirit. If God at times confronts and challenges us, let us never forget that He also comforts us as a mother stills her child. Don't lose heart. Don't let your aches get in the way of your alleluias. Live now. Pour your energy into a great work. Find a great cause and give yourself to it.

Get on with the living of your life and let me move on to the second point.

HE HAS GIVEN US A SPIRIT OF LOVE AND FREEDOM

But there is a second thing we would do well to see and to take with us. As we live between Christ's First Coming and His final coming, He has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of love and freedom to serve Him faithfully.

His words about the "end to history" were given not to frighten His disciples, but rather to reassure them. Regardless of how difficult things would be for them, Christ wanted them to know that they were in God's hands and they did not need to be afraid.

Christ came to free us from that which weighs us down, to free us to be all that God wants us to be, and from that moment when Christ first entered the human arena at Bethlehem, there came power and there came light into our world. There came life and there came a future. No matter how hard circumstances seem to be, there is never a time in the life of a child of God when he or she ought to conclude, "That's it. I quit. I throw in the towel. I give up!"

If God....if God can reach down and touch the earth in all its darkness and sin and win the victory, God can bring victory into our situation whatever that situation may be. If freedom is the ability to fulfill the purpose for which we were created, then fear is the power which attempts to destroy that purpose and that goal. Christ knew the awesome power that fear could unleash into the life of a believer. He saw that His own disciples were paralyzed by fear. He also saw just how liberating love and freedom were. Did Jesus say in John 10, verse 10 that "I came that they might have fear?" or "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly?"

Does Jesus come to cause us pain and suffering - the "aches", if you will, or does He come to give us the strength to sing our "alleluias" over the aches of life. Advent assures the believer that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of love and of freedom to serve Him faithfully.

TO BEAR WITNESS

And that brings us to the third piece of "Good News" for the Advent Season. Advent calls us to bear witness in our daily lives to the Christ who is yet to come. That is what Christ meant for His disciples to do as they waited for history to be culminated. They were to bear faithful witness to the love and power they had discovered in the Christ event.

It's like the seven year old little girl who was given a somewhat dubious part in her church's Christmas pageant. She was to be the star of Bethlehem. And after the first rehearsal, she burst through the door with her costume, a five-pointed star lined in a shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board. Her mother who had aspirations that her daughter might have the role of Mary, asked her "what exactly will you be doing in the play?" Her daughter had it right and said to her mother, "Why mother....I just stand there and shine!" "Stand there and SHINE."

The disciples, I'm sure, were concerned about their role in the future and their part in it. Jesus wanted them to know that their role was to stay behind and shine. They would not be alone. He would always be with them, giving them the power to transform their aches into some rather glorious alleluias.

There's a story about St. Francis of Assisi that illustrates the point I'm trying to make. One winter night there was a raging blizzard and the man who was supposed to wake up every couple of hours to keep the fire going at the monastery was unable to find Francis. So he went outside into the storm and found him kneeling at the side of a hill wearing just his ordinary clothing. His arms were outstretched. He was praying....oblivious to the wind and the biting cold snow. A day later when the man asked Francis how he could stand this, Francis replied,

"God warms my heart when I keep my eyes fixed on Him."

And God warms our hearts, too, when we keep our eyes fixed on God. It's so easy to lose ourselves in self-pity....to be called Bitter rather than Bubbles. There are situations in life that, if not dealt with properly, can leave us depressed and weary and sad. There are times when from our perspective, things appear as if they will never change. However, from God's perspective all things are working together for our good and for God's glory.

CLOSING Even though you may struggle, you can be victorious by placing your trust in Jesus. And even though your life may be touched by strife and by sorrow, you can have peace because Christ is your living hope. He is infinitely stronger than anything you are facing. With God's strength at work in you...flowing through you....you can live to fight another day.

The comfort and the courage that flows from the heart of God in to our hearts is more than sufficient to get our gears churning and working. This is the promise of Advent. In what appears to be so much darkness, we are called to trust, to trust in God....who will call us out of fear and into the power of faith, and as the Bible promises us, we will see the

"Son of Man...coming...with power and glory.  
Stand up and raise your heads because your  
redemption is near!" Lifting words of hope  
and of victory.

That redemption transforms our aches into alleluias. The Advent promise enables us to move from fear to faith. I feel for those and pity those who are content to sit on the sidelines complaining...while others in the arenas of life are spending themselves - their energies, their substance, their lives - in the cause of Christ. Friend, there is big work to be done and that's why you and I are here. Because of the promise made long ago, we can stand up and raise our heads....because our redemption is drawing near!

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness once again, O God. Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love. Visit our sick with the assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. Point out markers along the way to those in danger of losing their way. May this season of Advent be real and full of Your spirit for each of us. For the race is so short and we would try to run it well and always to Your glory. In the spirit of Christ. Amen.