

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, December 1, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“THE ARK OF SAFETY”

Matthew 24:38,39

One of the best-known Biblical stories is that of Noah and the ark. The ark Noah built was 300 cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. In a humorous rendition of the story God gives Noah the dimensions for the ark and Noah asks, "What's a cubit?" After a long pause God answers, "I used to know, but I forget."

A cubit is almost two feet. This would make the ark nearly 600 feet long. It was a very large vessel. It took Noah 120 years to construct on dry ground. Noah's neighbors laughed at him. Then the rains came. The waters rose. There was great destruction over all over the earth. But Noah, his family and the animals were kept safe. For a year they lived in that great Ark until the earth was dry and the Lord told Noah and his family to go forth to repopulate the earth. A rainbow appeared and God said, "... it shall be a sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature, for all future generations...When the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant...and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." The ark was the place of safety God provided for Noah, his family and the animals. God has provided us with an ark of safety, too. It's not a great boat but a person. Jesus Christ is our God-given ark of safety.

Now in speaking of his coming again Jesus said according to Matthew 24, "Just as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, getting married, going about everyday life, until the day Noah entered the ark. And they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. Two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left; two women will be grinding meal together, one will be taken and one left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. It will be like a thief coming in the night. So you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

We live in a world which is often uncertain. Unexpected events happen. We have insurance of all kinds, not because we can predict when events will happen, but because we can't. If we knew when the thief was coming, we would have stayed awake and stood guard. But we don't know. Even modern weather forecasting can't always predict the path of a hurricane. They often hit land at unexpected locations. Life is like that – uncertain, unpredictable, even unsafe. Relationships can change very quickly. Jobs can be here today and gone tomorrow. Health issues can arise out of the blue.

Unpredictable events can sometimes be surprisingly good. A woman said to her pastor, "My father is 90 years old and in a retirement home. He just won 35 million dollars in a lottery. He doesn't know it yet, and I'm afraid that when I tell him he'll have a heart attack. Would you go

and gently break the news to him?” So the pastor went and in the course of the conversation he asked the man, “What would you do if you ever won a lottery?” The man replied, “Nothing. I’m old. I don’t need the money anymore.” “But what would you do if you won 35 million?” the pastor asked. The man thought about it and said, “I would leave it all to the church.” The pastor had a heart attack. Life is full of unexpected and unpredictable events.

Now we have done much to make the world safer. We light up dark areas and put lots of salt down in the winter. Or compare today’s automobiles to those from say, 1960. Today’s safety features are light years ahead. I remember our first car with seat belts. They were awkwardly hidden under the seats. We never used them. While there are still dangers on the busy roads and some dreadful accidents, the rate of highway fatalities is way down. We are much more conscious of unsafe practices in so many areas of life now. Some people wonder if we’ve become too overprotective of our children, so that they no longer enjoy regular childhood adventures. We do more to protect our health now. We are taking steps to make the environment cleaner and to ensure everyone has safe drinking water, though again, there is more to do. We’ve even created “safe spaces” in colleges and universities. Now that’s fine if it protects people from verbal abuse or physical harm. When it insulates people from ideas and opinions they don’t like, then it’s not so good. It’s by working through the marketplace of ideas that one reaches their own conclusions. It comes as no surprise to you when I describe myself as an orthodox Christian believer. I am an Apostles’ Creed kind of guy. And my faith has been developed and sharpened not in a fundamentalist environment, but in the crucible of more liberal Christianity. We can’t shut ourselves off or keep ourselves safe from the free exchange of ideas.

The second coming of Christ is always the topic for the first Sunday in Advent. Now the Lord’s second coming is certain. He said so himself, and his word is truth. One day the Father will say to his Son, “It’s time to judge all that is evil and wrong and broken, to usher in my Kingdom, and to bring my people home. So go. Now.” And he will. The Son of Man will come openly as King and judge of the world. But we don’t know when. Not even Jesus knows. Only the Father knows. Furthermore, his coming will be unexpected. It will happen as people are just going about their ordinary business. Jesus said that it will be like the flood. Now it won’t be an actual flood since God promised not to destroy all flesh again by a flood. But it will be like a flood, a flood of judgement upon the earth, leading to God’s new heaven and new earth. For some, it will be a day of great danger and loss as they are left behind and lost. But for those who are ready it will be a day of great blessing as they are received unto the Lord and in to his Kingdom. And we can be ready. For God has given us a safe place for that day and for all of our days. Jesus Christ is our God-given ark of safety.

In Noah’s time people were given plenty of time to get on board. Not many did. Perhaps people didn’t take the warning seriously. Perhaps they thought they could wait out the storm. Some people do that even today, refusing to leave their homes in the face of a hurricane. Sometimes they are lucky. But people who thought like that in Noah’s time weren’t so lucky. Similarly, today, no one can stand in the coming judgement without being in Christ.

But thankfully, Christ has already come so that we can be ready for that day. God is even stretching out the days so that so many more people will be ready. God has given us Christ, born

at Bethlehem, living, teaching, performing Kingdom works, dying on the Cross for the forgiveness of sins, rising again, and even now drawing near by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is our God-given ark of safety, so that when he comes again all who trust in him will not be lost or left behind. Instead we will be swept away by God's love into the everlasting Kingdom.

The New Testament writers often use the phrase "in Christ." Those who were in Noah's ark were kept safe. So those of us who are "in Christ" by baptism and faith are safe in God's eternal love. To be in Christ now means we have nothing to fear, not just for that day, but for everyday. "The Lord is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken." "The Lord is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." No matter what unexpected event comes around the corner, no matter what floods come our way, even when the waters cold chill our latest breath, Christ holds us securely in God's eternal love. Jesus said to the storm "Peace! Be still!" when he was riding with the disciples across Galilee. And there was a great calm. It wasn't just that the disciples were in the boat, but that they were in the boat with Christ. That is what happens when we are in Christ. Across the waves and in the storm, his voice sounds for us, "Peace! Be still!" Jesus Christ is our God-given ark of safety.

Many years ago Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a Christmas story about a seven-year-old girl named Marta, and her mother. The story was set during World War II. Marta's father had been killed in the war. She and her mother remembered the previous Christmas he had spent with them. Now they didn't feel like celebrating. Still, they set out their nativity set and put up the tree. On Christmas Eve, Marta asked her mother, "There is one candle in the cupboard left from last year. May I put it in the window so the light will shine out for the Christ Child to see His way? Perhaps He will come."

Marta's mother smiled, and Marta took out the candle and placed it in a copper candlestick they always used on Christmas Eve. Marta wanted to see how far the light would shine in the night so she went outside. She took two or three steps and looked back at the window, where she watched the twinkling flame of the candle. Suddenly she became aware of a tall figure in a dark cloak standing beside her. She was not exactly afraid of this stranger, for she was a brave girl, but there was something strange about him. Finally, he spoke. "What are you doing here, little girl?" Marta responded, "I came out to make sure that the candle will shine out to guide the Christ Child's footsteps to our house." "You must not believe in a legend," said the tall dark man. "There is no Christ Child. That is a story told for the weak. It is ridiculous to believe that strength comes through love and sacrifice." But no one could tell Marta that it was not true. Why, she had talked to the Christ Child herself.

Marta was beginning to feel very cold and she said, "I am hoping the Christ Child will come. I must go in. Will you come into my house?" The stranger hesitated, but then decided to see the inside of a humble home where there was such a simple faith. Marta's mother, who had been sitting by the fire knitting when Marta went out, was still there, but in her arms was the Christ child from the nativity set. Around the baby a curious light shone and Marta knew that the Christ Child had come.

A simple story filled with truth. Yes, Christ is coming. But he has already come on his glorious sojourn from Bethlehem to Cross to resurrection and ascension. He came then so that we can be ready when he comes again. Jesus Christ is our God-given ark of safety. And so we put all of our faith in him. We live in Christ as he lives in us. We are strengthened by the living Christ at this table. We look forward not with fear, but with hope. We work for Kingdom purposes. We invite others to come into this ark by faith. For the door is still open and there is plenty of room. And by God's grace many will enter in, as we have, and be blessed, now and forever.