**1 Advent, Dec. 2, 2012, 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13; Luke 21: 25-36;The Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

Do you like Science Fiction movies? Back in 2002, there was a scifi movie called "Signs." Mel Gibson played the part of [Episcopal priest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Episcopal_priest#Anglican_or_Episcopalian), father, and farmer who discovers a series of [crop circles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crop_circle) in his cornfield . He slowly realizes that the crop circles were caused by blood thirsty aliens - they were signs. Scary signs! Fortunately, our lives are far from being scifi movies, but signs of various kinds do play a big role in our lives. They direct us, keep us from being lost, inform us, keep us safe. Lately, your Bishop's Committee has been spending time on signs: specifically, better signs to direct people to St. John's. Signs range from street and store signs to computer messages, from lighthouses to God answering prayers. We are not too good, however, at paying attention to signs sometimes. Have you ever stood at a door and pushed it over and over again trying to get it open, and it just would not open....until you stopped, stood away from the door, and saw that it was clearly labeled "pull" on the handle? Or, someone else came along and gently, easily pulled it open - and made you feel really stupid. Oh yes, we all can relate to this.

Today is the first day of Advent; this is a season of watching God's signs. Today's Scripture readings are about signs from God of the promise of what is to come. The word "Advent" means “coming.” And what is coming is Jesus, the Savior and Redeemer of the world. Jesus came to earth the first time as a baby, and we look forward to Jesus' "second coming." In today's Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of His second coming: "***There will be signs ....then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory...your redemption is drawing near***....***be alert...praying.***" This is not a scary scifi movie, this is the real thing, and it is going to happen. It is so big that the universe will echo with signs of the coming of Jesus once again. In the familiar Eucharistic Prayer A often used in our service, we say: "**Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."** That last part, **Christ will come again,** refers to the 2nd coming of Christ. We don't know when it will happen, but we know we must be ready. Jesus says, "**be alert**"-in other words, wake up.

Beep, beep. Maybe you are like me: I don't like alarm clocks. I would much rather wake up naturally than be woken up by a loud beep-beep noise or a radio. But, sometimes, like today, an alarm clock is not an option: it is a necessity -- I had to get here on time! Advent is an alarm clock season in the church: it is telling us to "Wake up and prepare for the coming of Jesus!" But this alarm clock (unlike my obnoxious one), is wonderfully refreshing and not annoying. It is an invitation: an invitation from Jesus to a better life, a better world, where the brokenness in and around us is redeemed. Paul says in Romans 13:11, ***"The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is near..."***

Ok, so now we are woken up, but how do we prepare for Jesus? Oh, we know lots about preparation - we hard working Wisconsinites. Let me tell you about all the preparation I have been doing for Christmas lately -- I have close relatives out of town, so I have been buying, wrapping, and mailing gifts to them (of course the biggest box went to our baby grandson). But wait, wrong kind of preparing. This is not what God had in mind for us during Advent. No, the kind of Advent preparation we are to do is a whole lot less stressful - in fact, it takes away stress and makes us feel better, it gives us energy and peace, and it is a whole lot more important than Christmas shopping because it is about eternal life. Advent preparation is being with God now, and looking to the future.

In our lessons today, we are told how to prepare. First, in our Gospel: Jesus tells us to "***be on guard...be alert***" and "***pray***." We are to be "on guard" for those things that pull us away from God, we are to "be alert" to the signs that God gives us of His presence -- and we are surrounded by them), and we are to pray: to focus on our relationship with God. The Epistle from 1 Thessalonians also tells us how to prepare for Christ's coming: to "***increase and abound in love for one another and for all... and...may He so strengthen your hearts in holiness***." We are to reach out to all. You have an abundance of opportunities at St. John's to reach out: you can help around the church in numerous ways, befriend someone new here; and you can help the needy by taking an ornament off the giving tree in the Hall, by caroling and ringing a bell for the Salvation Army, by bringing a can of food to church on Sundays, by donating to SafeHaven. So, the bottom line is that we prepare by actively living out our lives as Christians, and by putting God at the top of our list of priorities.

One more thing. This all sounds fine and good here at church on Sunday, but think about your normal, everyday thoughts about the future, and how you interpret the signs about the future around you. Let's face it, the first thing we think about is fear (not about putting God first and loving others). There is so much one can be scared about -the signs of health crises, injuries, war, loss are all around us. Why, even our nation now faces the fiscal cliff! We live in a chaotic world, our future is full of uncertainties, and we don't like uncertainty, so some of us are pessimistic, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Does God understand our fear when we look to the future? Oh yes. Did you know that the Bible says 365 times (one for each day of the year) "***do not fear.***" Even in the midst of all that stuff, you will be OK -- because Jesus has come and is coming-for you! When we fear, our focus is diverted from God. 1 John 4:18 says, "***perfect love drives out fear***" and it is Jesus who is perfect love. Our Psalm 25 from today put it this way, "***I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you"*** God's way is about trust. He is the hope, the expectation, the promise. And so we are to do as Jesus said in the Gospel, " ***stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*** If we are filled with Jesus, abounding in love for others, there is no room for fear about the future; our future is Christ.

We just sang "**Come o come Emmanuel**"-- in it we proclaimed that God is with us --here- because the word, "Emmanuel" means "*God with us*." The signs of Jesus are all around: the Sacrament, the light of hope in our Advent wreath, our Quiet retreat today, each other, our outreach projects, our prayers, the cross, the carols we sing. Spend extra time with your personal savior and sharing God's love, and **you will** experience Advent hope. And, if Jesus came today, don't you want Him to find you prayerfully serving Him, increasing and abounding in love for others, right up to your very last breath? Yes! Wake up and joyfully, calmly, without fear, prepare for Jesus. Amen.