Advent Sermon Series: The Hopes and Fears of All the Years
Sermon Title: "Down to Earth Love"
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 12:9-18
Salem United Methodist Church
November 27, 2016
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For the commercial world, Christmas is in full motion. The Thanksgiving foods are not completely digested before we are bombarded with the temptation to shop and experience all the sights and sounds Christmas can offer. In the church we see Christmas as a destination. So we wait expectantly and make preparations for the greatest miracle-God coming down to earth to live among us in human form. Advent is not only this expectant waiting for a newborn but also the expectant waiting for Jesus to return.

We don't talk much about the return of Jesus in the church or anywhere else in our society. There are no advertisements or commercials for "Jesus is returning" sales. There was a time when the church used the promised return of Jesus as a scare tactic. One needed to confess Jesus as one's Lord and Savior now so one would be ready for Jesus' return which could happen at any moment. Our Gospel lesson was used to convince people that they didn't want to be left behind while Jesus' took a neighbor. I am grateful that the church has moved away from this tactic, but as we moved away have we almost completely abandoned the entire idea of Jesus' returning? Jesus' returning is difficult to comprehend. It is a mystery. We don't know when it is going to happen or exactly how it is going to happen. We have no scientific instruments that can predict it, like we have to predict the weather. We can't put the date on our calendar. We cannot plan for Jesus' return like we can plan a Thanksgiving dinner or a Christmas party. We are good at finite things, but when it comes to unknowns, we are stumped. Some of us may even wonder if this promise of Jesus is real or was it a figment of his imagination? After all we've been waiting for two thousand years and Jesus hasn't returned yet.

We read the scriptures in which Jesus talks about his return and it seems like something out of an apocalyptic novel or a movie. In fact, this passage from Matthew spurned a whole series of novels called the "Left Behind" series that were published around the turn of the century. These are a result of the authors' imaginations spurred by their interpretation of this scripture. Even Jesus said that no one knows when he would return, not even he knew. However, Jesus did tell us what to do in the meantime. We are to be vigilant. We are to be prepared. We are to be expectant. Waiting for something to happen is hard. Children have a difficult time waiting for Christmas to come. And we are tired of waiting for Jesus to return, too. In fact, I think we may have given up on his return. Many see Jesus not as a Savior of the world, not as the Son of the Most High God, but as one who is a good example of how we are to live. If we believe that Jesus is just a good example, how are we doing by following his example?

Waiting for the return of Jesus is a like wandering in the wilderness, remembering what was and not knowing what will be. Sounds like life in general. We know what has happened in the past, but we don't know what the future will hold. No matter how much we plan, the future is unknown. We live in this tension between the past and the future which holds both our fears and hopes. Jesus says, "Be vigilant. Be prepared." How do we do that? In some down-to-earth ways.

This past week we celebrated Thanksgiving with family gatherings. What was yours like? What was discussed? Did you talk about the past election? Did you talk about your status in life or your hopes and dreams? They say that to keep peace in the family we shouldn't talk politics, money, or religion. I've read that we aren't to criticize the food on the table either or bring up past hurts to keep peace in the family. Maybe this is one reason we watch football on Thanksgiving rather than have an actual conversation. It's safer to yell at TV than at each other. One person said that when conversations begin to get heated, she distracts the conversation by offering her grandmother's pie. Everyone loves her grandmother's pie and it becomes the peacemaker in the family. What was your family like at your Thanksgiving table? Was it a time to be thankful for each other or was it a time of conflict? Over the many Thanksgivings that I have experienced, I have experienced both. I am pleased to say that this year it was one of gratitude for each other, and out of that came sheer joy.

Thanksgiving is a time to focus on being thankful for our blessings. One of those blessings is our families. That being said, members of our families can hold different opinions on a variety of subjects. And indeed that is normal. When we are thankful for our families and the love we both offer and receive, then we can accept the other and be kind. The church has a lot in common with a family's Thanksgiving table. We come from different backgrounds and have different opinions, too. Yet, we are all welcomed in the church. We all come hungry anticipating to be fed and anticipating a change. Advent is about anticipating a change, a spiritual awakening that will not only change us, but change the world. Advent is a time when we expect to have a heart check. Anyone who has had heart issues knows they need to be vigilant to prevent further damage to one's heart. Advent is a time to have a spiritual heart check-up with some down-to-earth questions. These are questions of self-reflection, open ended and challenging. Here they are:

How has following Jesus made a difference in your life?

How do you live a down-to-earth Jesus kind of love?

Paul understood these questions and did his best to answer them in his letter to the Romans. The church at Rome was not begun by Paul, but he writes to them as an introduction to who he is and what he believes. The verses in our Epistle lesson are sometimes called the Marks of a True Christian or we could call them how to love with a down-to-earth Jesus kind of love. The words explicate what Jesus meant when he said we are to treat each other the way we would like to be treated. It also sounds like the way we should treat each other around the Thanksgiving table. The early church had conflicts, too. There were those who came to Christianity without being Jewish and there were Jews who became Christian, believing Jesus to be their Messiah. Each thought that they were the true Christian. So Paul offered these words of a down-to-earth Jesus kind of love. Read over Paul's words. Underline the phrases that you strive to do. Which phrases aren't underlined? How are you challenged by these? Think of one person in your family that you are finding hard to love. Or think of one person in the church that you are finding hard to love. How can you show genuine love to this person? How can you honor this person? How can you extend hospitality to this person? How can you bless this person? When can you rejoice with them, share in their laughter and joy? Can you weep when this person weeps? How can you live peacefully with each other? Can we listen to the other and admit that we don't agree?

We are a competitive people. We believe that we are right and the other is wrong. We want to win and when we do win, it is usually at the expense of another. When competiveness gets in the way of our relationships, then it steals the amazing gift we can be for the other. Even gift giving has a competitive side to it. When we choose and give gifts, often we are thinking more about ourselves than others. Will this person like my gift? Am I spending enough on this gift? Will the person think I don't love them because I spent so little? We can become self-focused so easily. The Bible has a term for this. It is self-righteous.

Jesus came down to earth and gave us God's love. Jesus came down to invite us to a new way of living. He seeks to be in relationship with us that goes beyond our self-motive or self-righteousness. When we step into this relationship, we are reminded who we are called to be. We are reminded that God is bigger than me and my personal issues. God is bigger than the hate and evil in this world. God is brighter than any darkness. God seeks for us to set aside our self-importance and put ourselves second. What would it look like this Advent if we made ourselves second both to God and to those around us? What would it look like to put another's interest above one's own?

This Advent season we are being invited to open our hearts to the Christ Child, to allow Jesus to use us in sharing his love with the people around us. We don't have to agree with them. We don't have to win. We just need to allow God to use us to create those miracles and change lives. Perhaps it can all start with something so down to earth as a pie.

**Resources:** *Down to Earth* by Revs. Mike Slaughter and Rachel Billups