

HOPING FOR A HAPPY ENDING

24 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. ²⁸'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³²'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.' (Mark 13:24-37, NRSV)

I'm a sucker for a happy ending. It probably goes back to all of the Disney movies I watched as a kid. While the stories varied, the formula remained the same. A young

creature of some sort experienced trauma, usually the death of one of its parents (usually the mother), and fights against the odds to become a brave and trustworthy adult. The movies often ended with the hero finding a mate and eventually parenting a cute and cuddly offspring. It goes without saying that they all lived happily ever after. The circle of life completed...roll credits.

Even as an adult, I always hope for a happy ending. And usually I am not disappointed. If it's a romantic comedy, like *When Harry Met Sally*, we know that regardless of the mishaps and misunderstandings between the would-be happy couple, that somehow, someway in the end they'll end up together. If it is a drama like *Dead Poets Society*, we know that although the main character will be unjustly treated, that something good and inspirational will come out of it. If the movie is a who-done-it, like *Murder On The Orient Express*, we know that in the end the mystery will be solved and the criminal caught. And then there are the sad ones. *Old Yeller* has been ripping my heart out since I was 7-years-old.

I remember back in the early 1990's watching *Lorenzo's Oil*. I hadn't read anything about the movie and expected it would probably be set in the Middle East since it had oil in the title. I was shocked to learn that the movie was based on the true story of a 5-year-old boy named Lorenzo Odone with an extremely rare disease, ALD (adrenoleukodystrophy). The film focuses on the struggle of his parents, Augusto and Michaela, to find a medicine to help Lorenzo. In 1984, the doctors said that he would gradually lose all his functions and die within two to three years. As the story is recounted on the www.myelin.org website set up by Lorenzo's parents, "Refusing to accept this grim verdict, the Odone's set out on a mission to find a treatment for ALD and to save their child (Lorenzo survived, and is now [over] 25 years old). In their quest for a treatment

the Odones often clashed with doctors, scientists, and support groups, who were skeptical that anything could be done about ALD, much less by laypeople. Their relentless struggle tested the strength of their marriage, the depth of their beliefs, and the boundaries of conventional medicine. The Odones haunted medical libraries, reviewed countless animal experiments, badgered researchers, questioned top doctors all over the world” (<http://www.myelin.org/themovie.htm>).

At this point the film is absolutely grueling, Lorenzo is getting worse and worse, as his parents work feverishly to find help. In a moment of inspiration, Augusto comes up with a solution, which he called Lorenzo’s Oil. It is a combination of two fats from olive oil and rapeseed oil. However, by this time Lorenzo’s condition has worsened. While the oil cannot cure ALD, it can stop the deterioration. “The film ends on a positive note, showing several healthy children who, having followed a course of treatment with Lorenzo's Oil, remained symptom-free. The conclusion relates that Lorenzo can communicate again by a modified sign language, and that Augusto Odone was awarded an honorary Ph.D. for his pioneering work in researching and discovering a significant treatment for ALD. In the second chapter of the story, the Odones founded The Myelin Project in the hope of finding a way to restore the myelin sheath, which is destroyed in ALD and a host of other myelin diseases, such as multiple sclerosis. If this vital substance can be restored, patients like Lorenzo may regain function and eventually lead a normal life” (Ibid.).

The agonizing film is difficult to watch because we don’t know if a treatment will be found. After all the anxiety and angst, we finally get some relief at the end. And even this is tempered because the treatment is not a cure. But progress is being made so there is a ray of hope.

As people of faith we believe in happy endings. This is the first Sunday of Advent and the traditional theme is hope. Hope, one of my favorite words, is at the core of my faith. There's no denying that our world and many times our lives are a mess. Yet, there is hope that things can improve. And even when the most terrible tragedy occurs on this earth, we still keep the faith because our hope extends to the Great Beyond, Heaven.

During Advent, we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christ's glorious first coming in a lowly Bethlehem stable. This is the easy part of Advent—looking back at the treasured Christmas story and anticipating that holy celebration once more. A more difficult aspect of Advent concerns its additional focus—the Second Coming of Christ. While looking back at Christ's birth brings certain celebration, peering into the future, we do not know what to expect.

So it is with the future and us—expectations and reality often fail to mesh. A few years ago, a woman I've never met called out of the blue to question me about the Bible. After several minutes of discussion she came to her urgent point—I had better ready myself for the end of the world, which will happen on Pentecost, May 23, 1999. This caller fully expected the Second Coming of Christ to earth on May 23 and thus her life had a very different tone than those of us who expected to be going about business as usual. To say that I am a skeptic about such predictions would be putting it mildly.

It's no surprise that many of us are skeptics in general. Look at the world we live in. Politicians make promises, which go unkept and commercials tease us with dreams that can never be fulfilled. Self-help books offer easy routes to solving our problems with weight, money, and the opposite sex. But suppose we woke up tomorrow with

campaign promises kept, commercial dreams fulfilled, more money, more love, and less fat. Would we have truly found what we are looking for in life? Would we have found our purpose for living or peace in the face of dying? Would we know the meaning of life? Probably not. Only God, the One who knows us better than we know ourselves, can fulfill the ultimate expectations of the human heart.

None of us want to be disappointed by God. It's so easy to play the skeptic, and keep our expectations to a minimum. We think twice about praying, fearing God might not answer. We hesitantly speak of Heaven because it cannot be proven. We would rather believe too little than too much because we don't want to seem like foolish fanatics. And if in our heart of hearts we deeply believe, we often keep it to ourselves. But this is Advent—a time for wild and wonderful expectations. A time to keep our fingers crossed for a happy ending.

The early Christians knew about waiting and hoping. Jesus, the Messiah, had arrived in their midst. While among them, he taught, healed, loved, died, and was resurrected from the dead. These early believers overflowed with faith and power after the Holy Spirit's mighty arrival on Pentecost. They lived waiting and hoping for Christ's return, which they fully expected in their lifetimes. In the midst of horrible persecution, these Christians found hope in looking toward a time when Christ would come again as the righteous judge of the world. Their messianic expectation comes through clearly in today's Gospel lesson from Mark chapter 13.

The text says, "Then they will see the Son of Man [Jesus] coming in the clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect [the faithful believers] from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." We hear in these words a

longing and hope beyond anything the world can offer. The people cry out for deliverance that only God can give.

So here we are almost 2,000 years later still waiting and hoping. That's what Advent is all about. Celebrating Christ's long-ago birth and waiting to meet Christ ourselves. Frankly, I have no clear-cut answers regarding the apocalyptic imagery in today's passage. That's another sermon in and of itself. But this much I believe with my whole heart, we will meet Christ some day beyond this world's clouds of suffering and confusion.

God is with us. As we hope and wait and watch for God, let us live expectant lives that allow for God's mysterious presence to be revealed to us in unexpected ways. This is the challenge of Advent: to celebrate Christ's coming on that long ago Bethlehem night, to anticipate meeting him face to face, and to seek his presence day by day not only in this season, but all the year through. Because according to God's promises, we will some day experience the happiest of all endings. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, in this holiday season anxiety rises in many of us. Old wounds over people we loved who are no longer with us, economic pressures brought on by unemployment or underemployment, the stress of having too much to do and too little time threatens to fill us with worry, fear, and doubt. Strengthen us by the power of your Spirit to overcome our anxieties and instead be filled with hopeful anticipation—the anticipation of celebrating Christ’s birth and of meeting the Spirit of Christ along life’s way. Draw us closer to you and to one another in these days of Advent.

Through Jesus Christ our greatest source of hope we pray.
AMEN.