

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**Sunday, November 27, 2011 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Isaiah 64:1-8**  
**Mark 13:24-33**

**Sermon: A Thyme of Hope (Advent 1)**

The front page headline in the Ottawa Citizen on November 7<sup>th</sup> proclaimed: that Catholic priests were told by a Vatican official to “Spice up your sermons with scandal”. Intriguing and unusual Monday morning news. What the directive from the Vatican had in mind, it seems, was not to talk about football coaches resigning or the latest revelations of politicians or movie stars. Nor was it to incorporate an Entertainment Tonight format into our Sunday morning worship. Instead, the Vatican representative was calling on Christian preachers to preach the biblical stories and truths, and to choose biblical readings that might contain more colourful “human interest” stories rather than abstract theological concepts. In fact, even if all we do is stick to the Bible stories, there is enough human interest in the stories of our biblical ancestors to make our sermons quite flavourful. Last summer alone, the Hebrew scriptures featured stories of men deceived by their wives, arranged marriages, brothers at war, polygamy and all kinds of conspiracy theories.

Is the Bible scandalous? Maybe it depends on how much we have tamed the message of the Bible, making it more palatable and more in tune with our contemporary sense of “family values”. Is the Bible scandalous? Maybe it also depends on our definition of scandal. The English word is rooted in a Greek term meaning a trap or a stumbling block, something which catches us up, when we take our own success or control for granted.

What do you think? Are there hidden traps in the stories leading up to Christ’s birth? Are there stumbling blocks in the words of the prophets, aspects that make us think twice, or reassess what we have always taken for granted.

As we move into the season of Advent, and we prepare for the wonderful and shocking story of the birth of Christ, we can listen anew to the story. There are some pretty scandalous story lines in the Advent readings: Prophets criticizing kings and foretelling the judgement of God, kingdoms crumbling, an unwed mother giving birth to the son of God, the good news being proclaimed first to lowly shepherds, and then foreign kings travelling crossing boundaries to worship a peasant child in the humblest circumstances. The story of the birth of Christ is crafted and shaped to reveal the shocking truth that God is with us – but not in the presence or the form that we might have expected God to appear.

In many ways, we have “pasteurized” (or maybe that should be pastor-ized!) the gospel stories into either a pretty picture book story for children, or a quaint Christmas carol. We have taken two shocking gospel stories from the accounts of Luke and Matthew,

and made them into one story. Then we blended them together with a large scoopful of Western European culture resulting in a sort of beige egg nog coloured smoothie – perfect for a traditional Christmas party, perhaps. But not really reflecting the true spice and passion of Jesus' time and birthplace.

Or demonstrating the scandal that the details of his birth represented in his time and in ours. Or tripping us up with the stumbling block that he came to be for those who thought they had all the answers.

The readings for the first Sunday of Advent are the kind of readings that are meant to shock and awaken us – to ensure that we have not been lulled to sleep by those boring, un-spicey sermons!

In the Hebrew scriptures, we are prodded into wakefulness by the heart-felt lament of Isaiah's prophecy. Their ancestors in Judea had been found corrupt and faithless by God, they were overrun by their enemies, then enslaved and exiled in Babylon. When they were finally given permission to return home to their promised land, they found Jerusalem destroyed, the temple desecrated, their properties and possessions usurped by strangers. Why bother to return at all, they must have demanded. Why doesn't God do something about this??

And so a prophet put their words into a prayer of lament: Oh God, I wish that you would tear open the ceiling of the heavens like a bear breaking into a camping tent, and come down and put the world to rights. I wish that you would come with so much power that the nations would tremble in fear, and listen for a change.

These words push our imaginations and our understanding to the limit. They were written by a people who longed for a future that would be radically changed, not just continuing on the same-old, same-old path. And they take us from the bland smoothness of a Sunday preacher to the blood-curdling cliffhanger of our favourite soap opera.

The gospel selection doesn't pull its punches, either. Mark's gospel reveals a Jesus who speaks in apocalyptic images: images of the end times, when God abruptly pulls us up from the meandering path of "we've always done it that way" and instead sets us down, full speed ahead, on the exit ramp to the kingdom of God. To us, the images of a darkened sun and stars falling down out of the heavens seem fearful and threatening. But to the people of God in the time of Jesus, those portents signalled that God was finally working to liberate them from suffering – ready and waiting to tear open that ceiling of heaven and put the world to rights.

Every year at the beginning of Advent, we are invited by the words of scripture to enter into a debate with God. Your way or our way, O holy One?? Which one is it going to be? The apocalyptic images are too strong for us – not because we are too modern and sophisticated to believe in something like the end of the world. But these apocalyptic images found in the gospel challenge us in particular because right now we

are pretty comfortable with the present arrangement that we have with God. It sits well in our tummies, like comfort food. There are no strange or unusual spices to cause us any upset.

Perhaps that's why we start celebrating Christmas so early, we anticipate the traditional pastor-ized smoothiefied version of Christ's birth, because there are no surprises, we already know what's going to happen. We should be listening to the scandal of a God who cares so much about us, that God will set a trap for us, and cause us to stumble back into right relationship with our creator. A God who will put a fire in our bellies, with spicey stories about scandalous people of faith, and heavenly signs and cosmic transformation that will blow our minds wide open!

The theme of advent is waiting. Waiting is not something we do easily in this day and age, when we can instantly download a film from Netflix, or build a greenhouse to produce summer fruit all year round. When we can order something on a computer with our credit card and have it delivered to our door the next day.

While both the gospel and the prophet use dramatic imagery to stir us out of our complacent slumber, Jesus also suggests that the real coming of the kingdom is going to be much more subtle than darkened sun and falling stars – it will even be tender. “From the fig tree – as common there and then as a maple tree is in Canada – learn its lesson: as soon as the branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

The coming of God into our world may be as powerful as an unseen hand that causes the mountains to tremble. It may be transformative to the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. But it might also be as tender as a new leaf bursting through the buds of a branch. It will be as tender as a new parent reaching out to hold their newborn child.

The birth of Jesus speaks of the power of love being known in our world. We have probably sung enough carols and seen enough Christmas story books that the shock value of the original story has disappeared for us. We don't quake at the thought of Roman soldiers, nor do we recoil at the thought of welcoming sheep and shepherds into our stables.

But the story of God with us continues to disrupt not only our daily schedule, but our favourite traditions, our best intentions, and most of all, our expectations. It takes the bread and butter of our lives, and spices it up with new flavours and unexpected outcomes.

The waiting time is a time of hope. May the power of the Spirit at work in each one of us give us the courage to wait and see what God will birth anew in us this year. Amen