

**Sermon: Wax On, Wax Off Advent 1 November 29, 2020 Mark 13: 24-37**  
**Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church Ottawa, ON**

Christmas movies are a part of many people`s seasonal celebrations. Maybe especially this year as we spend time at home we will watch a Christmas film or two. There are the old standards like *A wonderful Life* or *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, or we might choose from one of many versions of *A Christmas Carol* (I am partial to the 1951 version with Alistair Sim as Ebenezer Scrooge) Christmas movies come in many forms, from action films like *Die Hard*, to rom coms like *Love Actually* .There is a cable channel that just plays Christmas romance films 24 hours a day...

Let me add another film to the list of seasonal movies. *The Karate Kid*. The 1984 version with Ralph Macchio and Pat Morita.

The movie set in the warmth of California and makes no mention of Christmas at all...but I think it`s a perfect movie for the season we enter today and for Advent this year.

The film tells the story of a young man who moves to a new and different place where he is tormented by a band of bullies who possess formidable martial arts skills. So his mother introduces him to an elderly Japanese neighbor who is rumored to be a Karate master.

Training begins. The young man is asked by his teacher to paint a fence, a big one, using a particular movement to apply the stain and it`s exhausting; all that repetition is hard work. Completely spent after days of labour the young man hopes the training will now begin, but instead his neighbor invites him to paint his house, sand his floor, wax a vintage car, each time using a precise movement and technique. Wax on. Wax off. Tedious exhausting repetition of movement.

Finally fed up with all the repetitive chores, the young man wants to quit. And then comes the big reveal. The repetition of movement, painting the fence and the house, sanding the floor and waxing the car that is the training. Repetition has taught the young man the basic movements of Karate and has built his strength for what`s to come.

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Today we enter Advent and begin the movement towards Christmas. And it`s a different Advent we enter in 2020. It`s a strange Christmas that we approach. At Rideau Park, Advent 1 would normally mean gathering families together in our Hall to make gingerbread houses together and we can`t do that this year. In the evening of this Sunday we normally have a bell concert but we will have to stay home and watch the webcast of last year`s concert this evening. In our churches, in our households there are things we look forward to at this time of year that we will have to forgo in 2020.

We have been living with the restrictions of the pandemic for nearing on 9 months. We have not been able to be together in our sanctuary for 38 Sundays. We are living in the second wave of the pandemic and our Christmas will be shadowed by covid-19 with all its anxieties and restrictions.

All of this has been hard. And it will continue to be difficult. But we can do this, because we have been training for a time like this for years. We have built up skills and strength for this moment.

Every year in Advent we get ready. We reflect on hope and nurture hope, and hope is what we need in this time that we are in. In Advent we think of how to live in darkness, how to wait for a promise yet to come. In this season our songs, our scripture readings, our prayers, our repeated spiritual practices, echo with themes of hopeful resilience and patient yearning. Year after year in this holy season we practice and garner strength for times just like these...

Consider the gospel we shared today. The people Jesus addresses were enduring years of Roman oppression, poverty and displacement under heavy taxation. Their days were dark and they longed for a better day:

“the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
<sup>25</sup> the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

So hang on says Jesus. Look forward. What is will pass away. Something new will come. It's dark but light is promised. Soon you will see it. Have faith and trust in God.

Year after year in Advent we immerse ourselves in the language and song, the story and symbol of resilient hope, of strong perseverance, of steady faith. We have trained to sit in this darkness. We have built up strength for this time.

In your life you have faced challenges big and small. You have overcome much. You have persisted, tapped into resources, learned where to find strength, encouragement, courage, humor...

And we have faith, confidence in god and in the abiding presence of the Holy close to us. Come Lord Jesus come.

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The sanctuary is empty today. But I remember times when people have gathered here to celebrate weddings, as they will again. I have seen many bridal parties come down our center aisle. And often bridesmaids when they know they are just a few meters from the front, kick into a higher gear and almost sprint the last few steps to the front.

In sports science this is called *teleoanticipation*. As we anticipate that the end is coming we tend to push harder towards the end. In a long race we might cross the finish line fully depleted as we expend our remaining energy in anticipation of the end. But...with no clear end in sight we pace ourselves. We keep our strength. We can keep going.

In this pandemic we may strain to see the end as we hear news of vaccines coming and that news is welcome. But just when will life turn towards normalcy? That is uncertain. When will

most people be vaccinated? Spring? Summer? Fall? The exact placement of the finish line is unclear right now. So our task is to keep going and sport science teaches us that, if we ask yourself “Can I keep going?” rather than “Can I make it to the finish?” we are more likely to find that the answer is yes...

To lift up our Advent theme of “thresholds”, in these early days of Advent we need not look too far ahead towards the future but instead let us claim our strength to live hopefully in the place where we find ourselves now

And we have trained for this. We have built up strength. And as we enter this Advent, in this holy season may we tap into the deep hope and promised strength that comes from God.