

If I gave you the story line, would you be able to supply the ending?

Try this one:

The teacher has to leave her classroom suddenly when she experiences a sudden illness. Six minutes later, she returns to the room and finds that the students have.... WHAT?

She finds them seated and studying quietly?

In pandemonium, standing on desks, throwing spit-wads and erasers?

Here's another:

Mother and father decide to go Christmas shopping together. They leave their three boys at home, and tell the 11-year-old to watch his brothers, do the dishes, and clean his room before they return. They are gone for three hours. When they return they find that WHAT?

That the boy has done his chores? That the house is still a mess?

Ah, here's a third one. Something like the first two, but much closer to home, for all of us are in this story...and it's happening now:

The Master, Jesus, leaves His servants and goes away for a long time.

Before He leaves, He charges them to be about His business until He returns. “Stay ready,” he tells them, “for you do not know when I am coming back.”

Then He leaves them.

His words prove true. Long centuries pass. Until suddenly, at an hour they least expect it,

He returns in power and glory, and finds them doing....WHAT?

That's the question I want to pose for you in this series of Advent sermons, all of which contain the words: WHEN HE COMES...

In Advent we're reminded: the Savior who came long ago is going to come again. What will He find when he comes?

Last Sunday, the question was, “When he comes, where will we be looking?”

Today the question is “When He comes, what will we be doing?”

That’s a question St. Paul himself pondered and prayed about. Listen to what he wrote in today’s Epistle lesson from Philippians:

READ THE TEXT

WHEN HE COMES.

On Judgment Day, that is. Paul calls it “The Day of Christ.”

We know He is coming, but no one knows when!

That’s the “X Factor” in Advent. The great Unknown of our lives.

It could be a thousand years from now...or this very night!

Like the “Big One” – the next gigantic Earthquake that will rock the Pacific Northwest, triggering tsunamis and toppling buildings and bridges...

We don’t know WHEN the Big One will come. Only that it WILL!

Regardless of when you THINK it will happen, it would be foolish for us to build buildings and bridges without a “seismic design component”!

Coastal towns in Oregon have been developing plans to survive the great tsunamis that would accompany such a quake...

plans to evacuate and get people to safety in just a couple of hours, which is all the time they’d have between the warning and the devastating wall of water

We don’t know WHEN Jesus will come. Only that He WILL!

Only there will be no warning sirens, no grace period of days or even hours. He will come suddenly. And finally.

Like the teacher coming to check on the students’ work,
or like those parents coming to see if their directive has been obeyed
so Jesus, the Master, will come to discover if His servants have
busied themselves with the work assigned...

How foolish we would be
to live our lives without a “Day of the Lord” design component!

Here it is, says Paul.

Our readiness will be expressed in what we are busy DOING when He comes...

Here's how he says it:

This is my prayer...that you may be...willed with...fruit...

Please note well! The key word is FRUIT.

We are to be FRUITFUL, not just Busy!

For everyone nowadays is "busy"!

YOU'RE busy, aren't you - with a score of family responsibilities,
doctors' appointments, and children's sports?

And even busier in this season, because we add a layer of holiday preparations –
trees and lights and shopping and cards and parties and...WHEW!

Not all our busyness is important. Not all is worthwhile.

Some of it is sheer fluff that makes no difference in the long run!

Back in the 50s in the early days of television, one of the most popular game
shows was called "BEAT THE CLOCK."

The contestants on that show were BUSY!

Two couples, pre-selected from the studio audience, were given a limited
amount of time – 55 seconds or less! – to complete some wacky stunt
in order to win the prize.

Among the stunts were the following:

blowing a plastic ship carrying a ping-pong ball from one side of a
water-filled tub to the other, without making the ball fall off...

stuffing eight balloons in a lidded wastebasket without breaking any
extracting three marshmallows buried in Jell-O using spoons held
in mouths, and depositing those marshmallows on a plate...

A huge clock counted down the seconds as the couples fumbled with the tasks
as the host offered encouragement and the studio audience screamed...

Their busyness was entertaining, but not especially IMPORTANT,
not FRUITFUL,
not really HELPFUL to anyone.

That game show was, in a quirky sort of way, a picture of how life really is for lots of people...

They know the Great Clock is ticking...and so they scurry about like mice.

Their life is busy! And noisy! And sometimes Entertaining.

But often shallow, or hollow...

devoid of anything truly helpful and enduring.

What about us?

As the clock and the calendar tick away our days, God asks, "GOT FRUIT?"

You know the fruit I mean!

The fruit God is looking for under our branches is that "fruit of the Spirit."

In these verses, Paul mentions one in particular – the very first of those fruits:

LOVE.

I know what you're thinking: "Oh, yes, another sermon on LOVE!

Like mom, the flag, and apple pie, who could be against that?"

LOVE is a distressingly common word,

used by practically everybody for practically anything!

For that reason, Paul makes it the subject of his prayer for them.

Listen again to the words of his prayer:

"This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best..."

Two phrases strike me in this prayer:

Paul prays for a love that "ABOUNDS more and more."

I have two apple trees in my back yard, both of which I planted 10 years ago.

During the growing season, I often watch to see if the fruit is growing,

and so it does,

from tiny, fingernail-size knobs to tiny green balls two inches across

to the mature reddish fruit nearly 6 inches in diameter!

God planted us to bear fruit. The fruit called LOVE.

Taking a cue from St. Paul, we look at ourselves and ask, "Is the LOVE we show growing DEEPER and WIDER as the years pass?"

Has our love begun to include people you never would have cared about earlier in your life?

Older people? Disabled people? Strangers? Immigrants?

Are you willing to do more, risk more, sacrifice more for others?

The second phrase that struck me was:

“that you may be able to DISCERN what is best...”

To our good intentions, we must add DISCERNMENT.

For LOVE without DISCERNMENT

is like a Boeing 747 trying to land in dense fog without any instruments...
good intentions that will likely end in a deadly crash.

At the beginning of his reign, King Solomon prayed for it – for the WISDOM to rule wisely as well as lovingly.

In the same spirit, Paul prays for all of us

a LOVE with its eyes wide open, a love that can tell the difference ...

between being truly HELPFUL and being an ENABLER

between being a FLATTERER who says “everything you do is fine”
and a FRIEND whose love can venture a word of correction when needed.

Even our attempts to LOVE may be misguided and wind up hurting
more than helping, if we don't have discernment

Not long ago I spoke to a woman who is a member of our congregation.
She was wrestling with a challenge to her love.

Would she speak the word of correction she knew needed to be spoken,
or would she keep quiet?

Paul is praying for the very thing she needed: a LOVE abounding in
WISDOM to discern what would be best.

During these days leading to Christmas, we are urged to love others by GIVING
gifts. But that's not an easy task!

For we cannot give everything that is needed
to everyone in need!

There's a giving tree in the narthex.

There's a list of needs in the bulletin.

There are bell ringers by red kettles at Fred Meyer.

There are appeals in the mail, asking your donations.

Too many choices!

So wisdom tries to discern WHOM to help, and WHAT to give, and WHEN...

Want that kind of Fruit?

A LOVE that is growing ever wider in its reach and deeper in its discernment?

It will come if it is rooted in JESUS.

I must tell you that those two apple trees in my back yard have suffered very different fates. The Gravenstein tree near the house has flourished, and it bears fine, big apples.

But the Fuji tree on the back corner has struggled. It has stayed small and spindly, and its apples are correspondingly meager in size and number.

I suspect the difference lies in the soil where they are planted.

If you are to be found FRUITFUL when he comes,
make sure that you are planted deep in Jesus Christ right now!

Looking to Him. Listening to Him. Trusting Him.

Last Wednesday, in the school chapel time, I showed the children a poster with the word 'CHRISTMAS' spelled out in big letters.

Can you read it? I asked. Yes, they could! "Christmas."

Now, I asked, can you look carefully and see a smaller word inside the bigger one? That was harder for them.

Finally I circled CHRIST and showed them. One boy read it...

"krist" he pronounced....then his eyes widened: "CHRIST!"

Will we see Him in the midst of the season that bears his name?

And will we be truly ready when he comes again? Doing what he called us to be doing?

That's the reason that instead of merely ADVISING the Philippian congregation,
Paul PRAYS for them...

and why I do not merely preach to you, but daily PRAY for you,
as I hope you do for me.

For we are in the midst of a story, whose ending is yet to be written.

The Master is away for a time,
but he will come back.

When He does, it is my prayer that He will find us FRUITFUL.