

1 Advent Yr B, 27/11/2011
Mk 13:24-37
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“Hopeful waiting”

Today we begin a new church year. We're now in the season of Advent, which means coming. The season is short, only four Sundays, and easily ignored or overlooked, especially in our culture where Christmas advertisements, decorations, lights and trees appear in some places on the day after Halloween. In Advent we celebrate the threefold coming of Jesus. We celebrate the coming of Jesus in the past, when he was born into this world as a human being like us. We celebrate his coming to us now, in the present mainly through his word and the sacraments. He is present now too through prayer and, as we learned from last week's gospel, in and through the least members of his family. We also celebrate what we refer to as the second coming of Christ sometime in the future. So, as an Advent people, we live in an “in-between time,” a “now and not yet” time. We are grateful for Christ's coming as a human being like us in the past; we are amazed at how he comes to us in the present to fill our lives with meaning; and we look forward with hope to his coming again in the future—or, if we die before that time, going to be with him in heaven.

Our passage from Mark's Gospel today picks up on the theme of Jesus coming. The picture Jesus gives us is a mixed bag. He tells us that we shall be able to observe cataclysmic events in the heavens. They are to be a sign that the end is near. From there he gives us the picture of a fig tree blooming with its leaves as a sign that summer is coming. According to one biblical scholar, Joachim Jeremias, this was quite a visual sign of hope since: The fig tree is distinguished from the other trees of Palestine, such as the olive, ilex, or the carob, by the fact that it casts its leaves, so that the bare spiky twigs which give it an appearance of being utterly

dead, make it possible to watch the return of the rising sap with special clearness.¹

After that, Jesus says “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” Then, in verse 32, Jesus goes in another direction and gives all would-be predictors of the end time a warning: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Over the centuries, right up to the present day, Christians have not listened to Jesus. Rather, they have been too obsessed with predicting the end times. In every case, they have been proven wrong.

However, there is another theme that Jesus then moves into, which I believe is the most important one. He tells the parable of an absent master who goes on a journey and leaves his slaves and the doorkeeper in charge of things—each one given their work to do. He commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch; to stand guard and be ready and awake to greet the master when he returns at an unexpected time.

In other words, Jesus is telling us that we cannot predict the future—all we can do is make ourselves ready for it as best we can. The following story illustrates this message quite well.

The children had all been photographed, and the teacher was trying to persuade them each to buy a copy of the group picture.

The teacher explained, “Just think how nice it will be to look at it when you are all grown up and say, ‘There’s Stephanie, she’s a lawyer,’ or ‘That’s William, he’s a doctor.’”

A small voice from at the back of the room rang out, “And there’s the teacher. She’s dead.”²

I think the small voice in the story is right. We cannot presume that we are going to be around in the future. Nor can we necessarily correctly predict how things are going to turn out for people. The future cannot accurately be predicted. We humans are limited, mortal beings; we can

see ahead only to a certain, limited extent. Even then, a disease or accident or some other circumstance might come along to change how we thought our future would turn out.

On this first Sunday of Advent, our theme is hope. We lit our first candle, the candle of hope. I think what Jesus is getting at in this gospel today—especially with the parable of the fig tree blooming and the slaves and doorkeeper looking after their master’s home—is that we do not have to be afraid of the future. No. Rather, we can look forward to it by hopeful waiting. How do we live our lives ready, and awake? How can we remain hopeful for the future as we wait for it? The following story is, I think, instructive.

In 1914 Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton, an English explorer, led an expedition to the South Pole. As the ice began to close in on his boat, he had to leave some of his men stranded on Elephant Island as he went for help. He secured another ship on South Georgia Island and returned for his men. After several unsuccessful attempts, the weather finally permitted him to sail through to where the men were, pick them up, and then get out before the ice closed up again.

Shackleton asked his crew why they had their things packed and standing by when he came back. They said, “Sir, when you left, you said you would come back for us, so we never gave up hope. Whenever the weather looked favourable, we would pack up our things and say, ‘Maybe Shackleton will return for us today.’ We were always ready for your coming.”

We don’t know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future. There is One who is returning for us.³ I would hasten to add though that we do not become like some of those far-out sectarian or cultic groups that we drop everyone and everything and do nothing but wait for Christ to return for us. No. Hopeful waiting is making the most of life each day; of seeing it as a gift from God.

Much of life, when you think about it, involves waiting. Yet, we are such an impatient society. Who wants to wait? Why should we wait in an instant world? However, waiting is necessary for many things in life. For example, we cannot expect to be Prime Minister of Canada at the tender age of four or five years old. You need to wait, to grow up, learn, and mature if you want to become the leader of a nation. Waiting is not easy in an instant world. Nor is it easy without hope. I think that hope makes waiting doable. The news of all the troubles in our world, nation, province and city can tempt us to lose hope for a better future. However, as God's people, we can wait in hope because we trust that our hope shall one day become a reality. Here I am reminded of a wonderful observation made by Helen Keller. She described hope like this: "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it." I believe that she is right. That is why I am here today, and, I believe that is why you are here today too. You and I have all faced and endured sufferings and hardships, disappointments and setbacks in our life journeys. Yet, by the grace of God go you and I. His grace has seen us through the sufferings, we have overcome them.

When work began on making the Ben Hur movie, Cecil B. DeMille talked to Charlton Heston about the chariot race at the end. Heston finally agreed to take chariot driving lessons rather than using a stunt double. Learning to drive a chariot drawn by four horses was not easy for Heston.

Speaking with DeMille, he told him: "I think I can drive the chariot all right, Cecil, but I'm not at all sure I can actually win the race."

Smiling slightly, DeMille said: "Heston, you just stay in the race, and I'll make sure you win."⁴

Jesus is saying the same thing in our gospel today: "Stay in the race, and I'll make sure you win." That is what it means to live in hopeful waiting.

A lot of our overcoming has involved hopeful waiting; not giving up; being like Shackleton's crew; like Charlton Heston; ready for a better future while living fully today. Hopeful waiting keeps us alert and awake—ready, willing and able to meet and greet Christ in the many and varied ways when he comes. Amen.

1 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 120.

2 *Preaching Now Newsletter*, November 1, 2011.

3 Ronald Newhouse, *Daily Devotions: A Few Moments With God*, devotion for Saturday, November 2, 1998, at: <www.devotions.net/home.htm>.

4 *Fireside Stories of Love, Life and Laughter* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), p. 4.