

First Advent – Year B – December 3, 2008 - Homily
Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
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A raggedy old man pacing up and down with a sandwich board strapped across his shoulders shouting “repent” and proclaiming that “the end is near” has become a cliché reserved mostly for cartoonists and old movies. For many of us this image is a walking advertisement that either leaves us a little embarrassed and wondering what happened to health care, or vaguely uneasy that one day he will be right. More modern movies go straight to the heart of real apocalyptic scenarios. One much imitated theme is found in the movies that reflect on the tragedy and horror of war and just how close we are to annihilating ourselves. In the other genre, there is usually some type of massive cosmic accident that is entirely out of humanity’s control with enough power to end all life on this planet, our island home.

In response to the anxiety of all possibilities, the Gospel of Mark says this, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert...” This is not a message of fear mongering. This is a message of great hope, and it reminds us that how we spend our time is a choice, one with eternal significance, albeit a few years or many years. Poet and author, Annie Dillard, says this, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Now when we think about it, she is absolutely right! The minutes add up to hours, the hours to days, the days to months and years, and before we know it, we can start to realize that the simple law of averages is no longer on our side.

This passage from the Gospel of Mark is a perfect introduction to the season of Advent, when we take the time to focus on preparing for the coming of our Lord in glorious majesty. At the same time, we look back in history and make room anew in our hearts to welcome Christ Jesus, the author of all life and salvation, and God’s greatest gift to the world. A significant part of the Advent season is to accept God’s invitation to take an intentional time out for self-examination, in order to make ourselves ready for our encounter with Christ. Here then are three aspects of Advent for our consideration: the eagerly anticipated future return of the King of kings; the present reality of our daily responsibility to live the Gospel; and simply growing in love and grace as a child of God, and a member of the Body of Christ.

Some of us, more than others, relish the idea that the world as we know it is coming to an end, and that the signs are all around us. There is escalating violence, wars springing up all over the globe, and spiraling fragmentation in society. It is easy to get carried away and extrapolate a literal interpretation of scriptural imagery to a firm belief that the end is truly near. It is also contrary to the Scriptural warning that we cannot know, and it is not for us to know. However, what if the warning here is not to free associate our current troubling world situations with the end of time, but rather an invitation to endure in faith, holding on to the one who was not destroyed by death, and whose words never come to an end? In the storms of life, there is one sure tower of strength, goodness, and love who is Jesus Christ is our Lord, in whom we are each called to put our trust and faith against all appearances to the contrary. Staying awake, staying alert, and being on watch. Could this be more about seeing the troubles of the world and of our own lives from a new perspective? Could it be that God desires that we view everything through the lens of the promise of our resurrected Lord, and the assured hope of salvation and eternal life in Christ?

While some might be drawn to seeking and interpreting signs, others of us would prefer to simply go about the business of the season. In the busy-ness of daily life, it is also easy to be distracted by the powerful and dynamic force of commercialism. We might say that we are living in the present by dealing with life as it happens. Yet I wonder if that is the same as truly being

present to the presence of God in our lives. We have a choice in living moment to moment. We can fill those snippets of time with all manner of busy work, chores or pleasures, and we frequently do. Or, on the other hand, you and I can be intentional about making each moment count, remembering to be diligent in our prayers, always listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This enables us to allow the moments that, as Dillard says, make up our lives to be given in love and service to God and our neighbors. We only have twenty-four hours in a day, and getting caught up in the cultural race to Christmas, may quite unintentionally leave us with less time to be faithful stewards of the Gospel. The cultural trap may push us further from the Good News of Christ's coming for the sake of the world.

The Advent season also calls us to look inward. We have to ask ourselves what happens to our bodies and our souls if we don't feed them? A famished body wastes away, and a starved soul withers. This holy season is a special time, reflecting the work that God is doing in the world; we are also invited to set apart space for focused self-examination and repentance. When all around there is anxiety and frustration, stress and rush, you and I have a unique opportunity to preach the Gospel without words by modeling a different way. The reflective quality of God's invitation throughout this season is how we truly prepare our body and soul to receive the gift of Christ. Looking inward is as important in our discernment as looking outward. Self-reflection is God's way of preparing us to be His outward and visible presence of love and peace in a world of chaos. It is God's way of helping us to be His hands and arms healing and reconciling the fragments of society into the wholeness of God's tender care. Rumi captures this well. He says, "Come out of the circle of time / And into the circle of love." When we offer back to God the gift of time He has so graciously given us, we will always be ready for the glorious coming of our Savior, whenever that might be.

Amen