

Mark 13:24-37

November 30, 2008

South Plains

1st Sunday in Advent

How Shall We Wait?

Somewhere between Indian summer and true winter, we begin waiting for Christmas.

Between bobbing for apples and shoveling snow, Between Halloween masks and pointy hats for the New Year,

Between autumn leaves and icicles, Between All Saints and Epiphany,

Falls the season of Advent,

Four Sundays' waiting.

It's the worst kind of waiting.

Caught between expecting too much and expecting too little,

We find every other building in the city programmed for shopping music,

While churches are lamenting their slow salvation:

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”

And while we're waiting,

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.”

We wait while the rest of the world shops.

Somewhere in all our confusion and ambivalence, God comes to us again.

Because God came to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and because God promised us through Jesus to come to us again, we are waiting. We wait confidently for his coming, but also with a certain amount of caution. We are alert as we wait, and at our best we do not become indifferent to his coming. Most of all, we wait hopefully, full of a hope that engages us in the mission that brought Jesus Christ to be born in Bethlehem so long ago.

Advent is a season that underlines the tension between Christians and the world. We are confident that God is up to something. History is directed ultimately by the God who saves. The world is not running aimlessly toward destruction, but instead is moving toward a grand fulfillment. Our confidence is not built on the comforts we enjoy or the promise of prosperity or the strength of our armies. Our confidence rests on the reliability of the God we serve, God's trustworthiness to do what is promised in Jesus Christ.

It's a wonderful season for sharing love and connecting with friends and relaxing around the fire. In all the delightful rituals and gifts that ornament the month of December, Christians can rejoice in this time of year with everyone else. The tension arises only because the rest of the world tends to think that the holidays are an end in themselves. We know that this holiday season points beyond itself. The life of Jesus re-orientes our lives to love others as he loves us. The joy of Christmas has

an energy that propels us outside the intimacy of our circle and into the wider world, to the ends of the earth.

Because we see the season differently, we can be cautiously confident. The caution is born of hard experience with our Christian brothers and sisters who tend to anticipate the end of the world a little too eagerly. “About that day or hour,” Jesus says, “no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (13:32).” We believe God will bring history to fulfillment. But, we know we cannot predict the timing of that fulfillment. We wait with cautious confidence.

We also wait in a posture of alertness. We don’t want to miss anything. The worst thing that can happen on Christmas morning is to give someone a present and get no response. We cannot be indifferent to what God is up to in our world. Imagine what God must think when a soldier dies in Iraq and no one mourns that death. Or, when ten year old boys are conscripted to fight in a war in Africa, and no one shudders. Or, when a smart bomb goes astray and no says anything except, “That’s collateral damage.”

Such indifference is what would cause us to miss the signs of grace in God’s world: the dedication of another Habitat House; a dentist hired to work fulltime in the Charlottesville Free Clinic; an addict receiving her one year anniversary chip for staying clean; a telephone call from a friend who’s been out of touch; a day off from

work. The simplest graces are the easiest to overlook unless we stay alert.

When the good shepherd separates the sheep from the goats toward the end of Matthew’s gospel, there is one thing that Jesus says both groups have in common. They are all surprised to learn that Jesus was hungry and thirsty and a stranger, naked and sick and in prison. One group, however, was alert to the needs of their neighbor. The other group was indifferent, and on that contrast hangs the judgment. We wait in a posture of alertness to God’s presence.

Most of all, we wait hopefully. It’s not that we ignore the terrible suffering and barbarism that fills the news these days; or that we disbelieve scientific warnings about greenhouse gases. But, we regard those awful things simply as aberrations in God’s world, distortions of a good creation that will be corrected in God’s good time.

In colonial times, a New England legislature was in session when an eclipse of the sun began darkening the sky. Some of the lawmakers panicked and several moved to adjourn the meeting. But one wise politician said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought.” (in L. Williamson’s commentary, *Mark*, p. 242)

That's the kind of hopefulness that can characterize our waiting not only during Advent, but all year long. The purpose of Advent, after all, is not only to get ready for the celebration of Christ's birth, but also to get us ready for the long term plans God has set in motion with that birth.

Those plans were fermenting in the mind of God long ago. And, God tipped his hand to the prophets centuries before Jesus came on the scene. Isaiah had more than an inkling of God's intentions. When the people of God were sinning so flagrantly, their advocate, the prophet Isaiah, said that the best they could do, their "righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth (64:6)." You know the reason disposable paper cloths are so popular is because a filthy cloth is next to impossible to clean. Even our good deeds are so infected with selfishness that they are like the rags the operating room throws into the incinerator. But, here's the good news Jesus brought. People are not disposable in God's eyes.

Isaiah knew that God had better hopes for us, so instead of assuming that the creator would tear up his ruined creation and toss it away, the prophet prays, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down (64:1)." And, that's what God finally did. The curtain between heaven and earth parted enough for the Son of God to become a son of the earth.

Isaiah lived in hope that God would rescue his people from their self-destructive behavior. His lament

over the Lord's delay in coming concludes with this poignant confession of faith: "Now consider, we are all your people." Isaiah lived in hope.

Advent rolls around every year in between Thanksgiving and Christmas, throwing up a caution sign to warn us against growing over-confident about the holiday. Reminding us not to become indifferent to the judgment and grace God spreads around us. Urging us, encouraging us, pushing us to live in hope.

Hopeful people stay engaged with Christ and Christ's mission. We will still get disheartened by the crime in our neighborhoods, but we will not stop imitating the good Samaritan to the neighbors we pass on the road. We may find ourselves disgusted with the greed of financiers who mismanage other people's money; but we will keep giving to causes that use our gifts well. Inevitably, government will disappoint us because to waste is human and to conserve is divine. But we will render unto Caesar what government requires and unto God what gratitude requires for all the blessings that are ours in this land.

We will wait in hope because we know that just as God came at Bethlehem, and just as God comes into our hearts, God will come to fulfill the promise of the gospel: A new heaven and earth, redeemed by Christ and full of grace forever.