

Sunday, November 29, 2020

First Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Isaiah 64.1-9; 1 Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.24-37

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/478930886833109>

(Sermon begins at about 13:00)

“Keep Alert, Now More Than Ever”

The season of Advent is all about anticipation, expectation, and preparation for Jesus Christ coming into our midst. Being the four weeks before Christmas, we tend to focus on this time being about anticipation, expectation, and preparation for the birth of our Messiah at Christmas. But this is only one of the “comings” that Advent anticipates. The first coming of Jesus at his birth in Bethlehem. But, as we see in today’s readings, Advent is also about anticipation, expectation, and preparation for the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the ages.

In this strange year that is 2020, anticipation, expectation, and preparation have a different focus than our usual Advent. For us, anticipation is about the anticipation that this pandemic will one day come to end, and we will be able to return to life as normal. Anticipation of an effective vaccine. For us, expectation is about the expectation of increased cases, increased death, increased restrictions and lockdowns. For us, preparation is sort of an impossible dream right now. How do you prepare for the future when things seem more uncertain than usual? Particularly this year when we thought that nothing else could possibly happen. And then something else did happen. In this year that has seen a global pandemic, social dis-ease, racial unrest, protests, looting, more wildfires than normal, more hurricanes than normal, and then an election that saw more divisiveness than any other in our history. What more could possibly happen? Don’t ask because there is still a whole month to go in 2020.

All three of our scripture readings for today were written during and in response to unprecedented times in the history of God’s people. All three deal with the unknown that the people faced, and contain words of wisdom on how the people are to get through it.

Our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah is a portion of a prayer of penitence. The part we hear today is an expression of hopelessness felt by the people returning from exile in Babylon. While they had dreamed of the eventual glorious return to their homeland, the reality of their return was far different. They faced significant hardships at the prospect of having to rebuild a nation that had been laid waste by the Babylonian conquerors. Particularly Jerusalem, where the temple had been destroyed. The language used to express this sense of hopelessness is almost apocalyptic, portending the end of the cosmos. Maybe a little melodramatic, but that was certainly how things seemed in the moment. Throughout the prayer the Prophet implores God to be merciful to his people. In so doing, there is a recognition that the people are ultimately dependent on God if they are to get through the rough times ahead.

Our Epistle reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians looks ahead to the end times—to the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the ages, as he foretold. Paul's take is a little more positive and upbeat than Isaiah's vision of the end. In this writing, Paul gives thanks for God's grace given through Jesus Christ. How the teachings and example of Jesus have enriched the people and given them what they need to face the end of the ages. Not with fear, as did the ancient Hebrews, but with anticipation. As Paul tells the Church in Corinth, they have been given the spiritual gifts necessary to carry on. They have what they need to be prepared when the time comes. "He will also strengthen you to the end" (1 Cor 1.8). Unlike Isaiah, Paul does not see a need to plead for God's mercy. He recognizes that God is faithful to his people. And the implied message is that because God is faithful, the people are to be faithful in return. That is the only preparation that is needed.

The Gospel reading from Mark is part of a discussion Jesus has with his disciples, responding to their questioning about the end times, about when he will return. The disciples are understandably a little anxious. Jesus has foretold his own death and resurrection in Jerusalem at the hands of the temple authorities. And here they are, in Jerusalem, just a couple of days after Jesus' triumphal entry. It is only two days until Passover. It is only two days until Jesus' arrest and the beginning of his Passion. While the disciples don't know the exact timeline, they are justifiably anxious as Jesus seeks to wrap up his ministry and prepare his disciples to take over the work he had been doing for the last three years.

In his response, Jesus first invokes the image of ancient prophecies of the physical end of the world. He then uses the lesson of the fig tree—the fig tree being a conventional symbol for Israel. Essentially saying that if you look around at what is going on in Israel, it is pretty obvious that the end is near. Although, "about the day or the hour no one knows" (Mk 13.32)—not even Jesus. Only God the Father knows when all of this will happen. So rather than be anxious, the best thing the disciples can do—the best thing any of Jesus' followers can do—is to keep alert.

While he doesn't specifically say it, the unwritten message Jesus gives to his disciples is, "you've got this." They don't need to worry about the timing or what exactly will happen. There is nothing they can do to anticipate or to prevent or even to prepare. Because the reality is, they are already prepared. Over the last three years, he has taught them and shown them by his example how to live a faithful life. He has prepared them for any eventuality. All they have to do is keep awake, keep alert. So that when things do start to happen, they will be ready to respond however is needed.

Okay, as a planner, not the answer I want to hear. I want the details. I want the complete plan laid out in excruciating detail. Maps, flow charts, timelines, action lists. That's how you get prepared. But Jesus says, "sorry, no. All I can tell you is keep alert."

Jesus uses the image of servants whose master has gone on a journey. They don't know when he will be back. But one thing is certain. Even in the master's absence, there are things to be done to keep the master's estate running smoothly. The servants have jobs to do. The work doesn't stop just because the master is not around to keep a watchful eye. If they know what's good for themselves, they will continue to do their jobs so that things are ready for the master when he does return. In other words, "keep doing what you're doing."

That's what we are supposed to do. That's how we are supposed to prepare for Christ's return. Because the reality is that we are already as prepared as we can be. Jesus has seen to that through his teachings, through his example, and through the gift of salvation he bestowed through his own death and resurrection. So, what we need to do now, in the meantime, is to keep doing what we have been doing. We are to keep worshiping faithfully. Even if we can't gather in-person and even if the way we are doing worship is a little different from what we normally do. We are to keep feeding the hungry and caring for the homeless. Even if our Food Bank distribution and meals at Feed My Lambs look a little different than they normally do. We are to keep providing for those who do not have adequate resources. Even if that means buying gift cards instead of shopping for Thanksgiving food baskets and Christmas gifts for families we have adopted. We are to continue studying the Bible. Even if it is socially distanced with some people accessing via Zoom. This is how we get through these times of uncertainty. This is how Christ continues to come into our midst, even in times of uncertainty.

Each of our readings for today were originally written during times of uncertainty. The uncertainty of what the exiles faced upon returning to their homeland. The uncertainty of the early Christians regarding the end of the ages. The uncertainty of the disciples at what would happen following Jesus' death. The example of these readings, while addressing different circumstances and contexts, nonetheless speak to our own uncertainty today. Particularly our Gospel injunction to keep alert.

If anything, in these unusual times, these extraordinary times, we have had to be even more alert. Alert to new ways of doing things. Alert to our potential impact on the wellbeing of others. Alert to such things as social distancing and wearing of masks. Alert to ever-changing rules and regulations regarding what we can and cannot do—and of how we can and cannot do those things. It is easy to get so wrapped up in all these other things that we are in danger of letting the meaning of this season slip into the background. But we cannot let that happen.

The traditional symbol of the Advent season is, of course, the Advent wreath, with its four candles. Many devotions for the season designate these candles as representing hope, peace, joy, and love. As we move through this season, we light one, then two, then three, then all four candles. The light of these candles symbolizing the hope of this season, the peace that we long for, the joy we experience at the birth of our Messiah, and the love of God who comes to us in the flesh. Lights of hope that overcome despair, peace that overcomes discord, joy that overcomes sorrow, and love that overcomes hate.

In these unprecedented times, may the light of the Advent wreath and what the candles represent take on new and greater meaning for us. May they be a guiding beacon. May they be the reminder we need that, now more than ever, we need to be alert. Alert to the many ways our Lord comes into our midst, even during—particularly during—times of uncertainty. And alert to the ways that we can keep his message of hope, peace, joy, and love alive, even during—particularly during—times of uncertainty.