

WATCH!

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November 27, 2011
Advent 1

The sermons for this Advent will all focus on a word each week. The word for today is Watch. The gospel for today can be summarized up in this idea of not just paying attention, but of watching in an active sense, not a passive sense. We are not called to merely stay awake, but to watch for Christ in order to be ready. Ready for what, well that is for the next two weeks. The word for today is watch.

I remember back when I was new to the Episcopal Church. I had never been in a liturgical church before and did not understand Advent, Lent and the other seasons. I came that first Sunday in Advent and heard this bizarre reading from Mark. I remember thinking to myself, "I thought Advent was about getting ready for Christmas. Where is the story about Mary and Joseph? What is the Son of Man coming on a cloud?" I was really confused.

Nick the rector explained to me that in Year B we read primarily from the Gospel of Mark and that there is absolutely nothing about Christmas in Mark. This of course was the first of many shocks to my theological system. For it is absolutely true that there is no nativity story in Mark. Mark starts with John the Baptist. If you want the nativity story you have to go to either Luke or Matthew.

By the way I am going to offer a mini-course in those two versions of the birth of Jesus on Wednesday night December 7 and 14 while the Kerygma class on Revelation takes a brief break in their studies. Kerygma will meet this Wednesday, but then resume immediately after New Years. So come and join me in that little preparation for Christmas as we look at Matthew and Luke's version of Jesus' birth.

And now back to the Gospel of Mark. Nick explained to me that what I had heard was part of Mark called the little apocalypse. A brief statement about what will be at some time in the future. Advent is not just about preparing to remember and celebrate Jesus' incarnation, but is also about preparing for when he comes again.

Mark's gospel does not have a Christmas story because his theology did not require any information about the incarnation. Mark's gospel is all about the movement to the cross. In fact that is the focus. Mark's gospel does not contain any information about the birth or for that matter the resurrection of Christ. Mark's gospel concludes with the women fleeing the tomb and they do not say anything to anyone. Mark's gospel has no resurrection appearance. What is there has been added at a later time.

The little apocalypse of which today's passage is a small part plays a significant role for his theology. Apocalyptic writings are those writings surrounding the end times and the revelation of what is to come were common in the world of Jesus' time. A major debate within Judaism was about what would happen at the end of the world. Would there be a general resurrection or not? Was there any life after death? That was a huge point of contention between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

For Mark this was all about the in-breaking into our world of the kingdom of God. This in-breaking would release the early Christians from their time of persecution. The kingdom would rescue them from all the attacks and they would get their reward for being faithful. Rather than dread the end they embraced it and looked forward to it with eager anticipation. Notice how when these doomsday cults pop up and declare the end of the world it is often around a time of great strife and upheaval in the world. This was true of the early church and true throughout time.

This is why the key word in this passage is watch. Stay awake for you do not know when the end will come, but more important the call is to watch for it. This is the point of the passage about the fig tree. Stay awake. Keep your eyes open. Watch for the signs, watch for the Son of Man to return.

Over the next few weeks our readings will be filled with words like today's gospel.

There are two types of waiting. One example is that of a farmer waiting for spring to plant his crops and during the growing season awaiting harvest. There is a sense of anticipation in both, but one is passive and the other is more active. Waiting to plant in spring involves a time of quiet although there is always some activity. Repairing machinery, ordering seed etc. The other, the second one has a great deal more anticipation and activity. We've all planted seeds and gone out to check to see if anything has started. We make sure the weeds don't grow up and pull them out so our garden will grow. We see the start of the fruit and anticipate the day when we can pick that first bean, tomato or squash and run inside to eat it. Then that day comes and our joy is complete. This is what the readers of Mark were waiting for.

There was also the sense that the boss has left us in charge, but will come back to check on what we have done. We must be ready when he comes. We are responsible to do more than sit back and wait, but to wait in active sense to prepare for his arrival.

How do we watch for the signs? How do we listen? How do we know what we are looking for? I hope to begin to explore that with some of you on December 3 when we have our quiet day that will center on how individually and in a community we can watch for the signs of God's direction for us. I hope you will join me for that day.

Of course the problem for the readers of Mark is that the world did not end! Jesus did not reappear and rescue them. This is where the other gospels and Paul's letters

come in. These writings deal with a new reality and the focus now turns to how do we live out the teachings of Jesus as we wait and that is where we still are today.

In this waiting and watching I am reminded of a famous story about a church in the Washington D.C. area where people were lined up waiting to come in for a Thanksgiving dinner. As the doors opened and people flooded in for the meal an older woman yelled, "STOP!" The crowd immediately stopped and then she said, "Where are your manners we need to say grace before anybody sits down to eat." When nobody spoke up she continued, " Thank you God for the food that you have placed before us this day. May we count our many blessings. Thank you Jesus for your presence with us tonight. I know you are standing in this line with us tonight." This woman was conscious of watching for Jesus even in unexpected places. This woman was aware that among the last and the least we are most likely to find Jesus. She was watching for Jesus.

One way we can be part of this watching is by watching what we do and say in Christ's name. The Ignatian examen is part of being ready. Ignatius encouraged his brothers and sister to take time each day to look at what has happened in the day. We are asked to prayerfully consider, when I have encountered Jesus this day. What have I done this day to be watchful? What do I have to be thankful for? What do I need to ask forgiveness for?

This is not just watching for the big one, the final appearance, but for those opportunities to see Jesus in our daily lives. This is the active portion of the waiting. Just waiting for the big appearance is too passive and turns to focus inward on our salvation. Looking for Jesus on a daily basis, seeking to be the feet and hands of Jesus is the active form of waiting Jesus asked his disciples to do. Advent is about waiting for Jesus to come at Christmas, in the second coming, but most importantly watching for him to come into our lives on a daily basis. This active form of watching is what Jesus asks us to do this Advent.