

First Sunday of Advent

Year B

Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

I Cor 1:3-9

Mk 13:33-37

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“Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.” These words introduce the Gospel reading today, and set the theme for the season of Advent. Both in religious and secular society, we are anticipating something wonderful. For holiday shoppers and little children, being ready means taking advantage of those shopping days before Christmas, and waiting for the hopes expressed in your Christmas letter to Santa to come to fruition under the tree on Christmas morning. Expectations for the holiday shopper often lead to anxiety. For people of faith, however, it should be a different story.

Isaiah uses the imagery of the potter and the clay, a significant reminder that we are in the hands of a God who loves us, who took the clay of the earth, breathed life into us and shaped us into creatures who share God’s value for each individual, and to see ourselves as a work in progress, living in hope and great expectations. People who see God at the center of their lives can deal with the forces that distract us from the true meaning of the season of Advent. Being in the hands of the potter implies a readiness to be shaped into the best person we can be, relying on the wisdom of our God who knows us better than we know ourselves. Keeping ourselves focused on this God who shapes us is to admit humbly that we are willing to place ourselves in the hands of God and let ourselves be led through what may sometimes be the painful process of being molded. The words of Augustine come to mind when he prayed for self-knowledge in the context of knowing himself and God, and then accepting God’s will. The potter sees what the clay can become; the clay allows the potter to shape it to that end.

Jesus taught that we are always in God’s good hands. His preaching accentuated trust in God’s wisdom and letting ourselves be guided by God’s will. His constant theme is to be ready, to live as if we might be called to accountability at any moment. We can look at this readiness from different perspectives. One way might be to see it as paranoia, nervously looking over one’s shoulder in anticipation of being yanked out of life and hauled before a tribunal, a great and powerful judge. Another is to see this readiness as the commitment of someone who truly believes that following the example of Jesus is not only the means to saving oneself, but is also the way to a truly happy way of life. Focusing on readiness, living in the presence of the Lord at every moment of our lives, is the legacy of Jesus Christ to his followers. His call to be ready is not a threat; it is an invitation to happiness. Being ready means that we live each day meaningfully, that we are in constant communication with the God who loves us, and that we act everywhere as if we are in God’s presence not as “big brother” monitoring our every move, but as the loving presence of one who cares for us and keeps us close. What it comes down to is our choice, our perspective, our belief.

There’s a lot of talk nowadays about the end times. It’s interesting that this conversation is almost always connected to disasters – wars, floods, earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes,

global warming and the like. There is a tendency to refer to the rapture and the end times exclusively in terms of danger, fear and anxiety, which leads to an unmistakable connotation that God's primary motive is judgment. If we believe in a God of love, what do we have to fear? If we admit that we don't know everything, we are better off trusting in a God who does know everything. To act otherwise seems to suggest that we have it all figured out and can predict how God is going to act. In other words, we take the accounts of the end times and interpret them according to what we want them to mean with the outcome that we are expecting. Doing this, what is overlooked is the key concept that "we do not know when the Lord of the house is coming." Speculation is rampant, especially from literal interpretations of the book of Revelation, that disasters herald the coming of imminent doom, and presumptive preachers use this to frighten people and then dictate to them how they should act, which often coincides conveniently with their particular brand of Christianity. But rarely do we hear them speak of a love-based anticipation of the end times. We should be welcoming the end, not dreading it. Just as we look forward to the magic of Christmas for its many festive values of family and fellowship, so too we should look for the second coming of Christ with happy anticipation of the fulfillment of all our hopes and dreams, our expectations and desires.

"Be watchful! Be alert!" These are the words of someone who loves us, not of someone who is threatening us. We await the birth of Christ our Savior. He came to save us by showing us the way to happiness, to the God who loves us. We have nothing to fear from his words; they are words of hope, of promise, of dreams to be fulfilled, just like the true spirit of Christmas.