

Isaiah 64: 1-9, 1 Cor. 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 24-37  
Olivet Church, C'ville, VA, Dec. 3, 2017

### *Awaiting Christ's Return*

The house lights go off and the footlights come on. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton.

On the sidewalk the child gazes intently down the street, the sound of the parade beginning to reach her ears.

On a walk the sky, trees, and fields suddenly take on a Technicolor vibrancy, a deep silence descends on your ears, you feel a lightness of being that seems to free you to step through the veneer of the visible dimension into another realm altogether.

Frederick Buechner writes, "The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment."

The first Christians lived in such an extraordinary Advent moment. They stood on the threshold of God's kingdom of justice and peace opened up in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The recent miraculous intervention of God in human affairs in Jesus was fresh in their hearts and minds. And Jesus' future return to usher in the fullness of God's will on earth was expected any moment, any day. The powers of evil, sin, imperial oppression, and death had been defeated. A new and eternal life and kingdom had opened up. The church could dare to touch the wounds of lepers, pour out its resources for the poor, turn the other cheek and go the second mile, and endure suffering and persecution all the while singing "alleluias." For the tired, broken, rebellious world was winding down; and the glorious future and peaceable kingdom was arriving.

But we can imagine, that the early Christians began to tire of living in that expectant moment, standing on tiptoes gazing into the future, giving of themselves and their substance with abandon as they leaned into the future fullness of God's kingdom on earth.

Why else would Mark have preserved and repeated the words of Jesus, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come?" After all, you don't need to warn the night watchman to stay awake unless he appears to be getting drowsy. The church needed to keep Jesus' call to watchfulness alive because they were having difficulty sustaining their hope; and hope's resulting expectant living and active waiting over the long haul.

Mark undoubtedly recognized and sought to address this "faithfulness and compassion fatigue" as he wrote his gospel to disciples who were in effect second generation Christians. Though Jesus had said the first generation would not pass away before he returned, Mark also remembers him saying: "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come?"

And he recorded two other sayings of Jesus as well. The first reminds us that we cannot know or predict the time of Jesus' return. "But about that day or hour" Jesus said, "no one knows, neither

the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” The frequent attempts to develop a calendar, a timetable, a date certain for Jesus’ return may lead to profitable book sales, but they clearly ignore this statement of Jesus. His return, and the transformation of earth by God’s heaven, will come in God’s own good time.

But Jesus does not simply warn us from wanting to know too much, or basing our response to his gift of new and eternal life in the kingdom of heaven on its predicted arrival date. He also shares another word, a parable, about a man who went on a trip and left his servants to manage while he was gone. There is no lack of work to do while Christ is physically away from us. And it can’t be deferred or neglected because Jesus doesn’t seem to be in a hurry to return. The only reasonable thing to do if you can’t procrastinate because you don’t know his return date, is to fulfill the tasks that the master has given you to do.

At first glance this parable seems to be simply repeating what Jesus said earlier, “keep awake.” But there is more in this story than an exhortation to expectant, Advent-like waiting. For Jesus says the master could come “in the evening,” and in the next chapter Mark tells us that “when it was evening” Jesus ate his last meal with the disciples. Or, Jesus says, the master could “come at midnight,” and Mark records that, later that night, the disciples went with Jesus to Gethsemane. And while he prayed the disciples, weary of waiting, fell asleep. Or perhaps, Jesus continues, the master will “come at cockcrow” as when, in the next chapter, Peter turned to the accusing maid saying “I do not know the man;” and then the cock crowed. Or maybe, he says, the master will “come in the morning”; and Mark writes that “as soon as it was morning” Jesus was bound and led away to his trial and to his death, and the fullness of God’s love, power, and glory was present in horrific suffering.

Each passing minute is filled with the potential for faith or denial, decision or betrayal, hope or despair, love or indifference as we respond to Christ’s coming to us in the midst of time, not merely at the end of it. We realize that every moment of the day is already alive with the promise of God’s presence, of God’s coming, of God’s kingdom breaking in and God’s will being done here on earth as in heaven.

A year ago I spent some time with local photographer Robert Llewellyn who was trying to get some pictures of owl, eagle and woodpecker nests or holes in trees. I noticed he was constantly picking up leaves, small flowers, seeds, and other natural objects and examining them and putting them in his pocket. Responding to my surprised look he said, “I’ve resolved to explore the world around me as if I am visiting another planet.” I suspect when Robert walks in his backyard, or down a city sidewalk, or beside a mountain stream; that he sees things that none of the rest of us do, because he carries that perspective with him.

And I dare say, that those who anticipate God’s presence and kingdom penetrating into their lives and the world around them at any moment, see and experience things that others do not.

One of the joys that led me to become a more avid birdwatcher, was the discovery that there are so very many birds that are not noticed or appreciated unless you look and listen for them. They don’t come to your feeder, they don’t stand on your gatepost and sing, they don’t hop around in

your yard. But they are there, some perhaps only seasonally: warblers, cuckoos, thrushes, vireos, kinglets, flycatchers, even the “elusive” snipe!

Isn't growing in the spiritual life about cultivating our attentiveness, our capacity, to sense and see God's hand at work in our lives and in our world; to sense and see God's eternal kingdom breaking in as heaven and angels bend near the earth. Growing in the spiritual life is trusting more with each passing day that our lives, our work, our love, our giving is aligned with the way the master wants the house kept for our and all of God's children's joyful thriving, now and for all eternity.

One year Tom Long taught a confirmation class with only three young girls in it. In one session they were discussing the Christian calendar and the various festivals and seasons of the church year. When they came to Pentecost he asked if they knew what that was. Since none of them did he proceeded to inform them that it was when the church was sitting in a closed room and praying as they were fearful, and not certain about what God wanted them to do as they awaited Jesus' return. And the Holy Spirit came upon them with a rush of wind and flames that alighted on each person. And they went out into the streets to begin boldly proclaiming the good news about Jesus in all the languages of the known world. Two of the girls simply looked at him with blank stares. But the third looked astonished, her eyes wide. “Reverend Long,” she said, “I must have been absent that Sunday!” The beauty of that moment, Long recounts, was not that she misunderstood Pentecost, but that she understood something about the church and the life of faith. In her mind there was the expectation that any moment, any place, any Sunday; God could be present.

Advent is the season for waking up, living anew in expectant and active waiting, remembering that our Lord says to us, “what I say to you I say to all. Keep awake.”