

November 30, 2008

First Sunday of Advent

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

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:33-37

When times are difficult, many of us will echo the ancient Hebrews in the Book of Isaiah, who were demanding that God come down and straighten everything out. They were terrified of what they perceived as God's absence and anger. They felt that they were serious sinners, yet they were confident that God could make things right again. Their confidence came from the conviction that God was their creator, their father, and that they had to be mindful of how God wanted them to live.

Mindfulness is what our gospel reading is about. Jesus urges his followers to pay attention—they do not know when the time will arrive, the time of his second coming. They must not be caught sleeping.

How does all of this apply to us? If we do want God to fix the mess we've gotten into, how do we think this will happen? How will we know what God wants? And what is expected of us?

In the 26 years that I have been a Catholic, I have noticed that we rarely if ever agree on the issues that confront us as Christians. One parishioner said that this is a good thing. The Catholic Church is for everyone. I am reminded of a cartoon that was published just before Pope Benedict's visit to the United States. The Holy Father was depicted as frantically reading a book on how to herd cats.

With this in mind, how can we know when God is present with us, when God is speaking to us? How can we know what God wants us to do. I'd like to suggest that doing stuff may not be what God does want of us at this moment. Advent is traditionally a time of watching and waiting. In today's brief excerpt from the Gospel of Mark the words "watchful" and "watch" are used four times. This should make sense to us. We are a very visual culture.

But there's also listening, something we do not do very well, even with our cell phones and I-pods. Where might we listen for the voice of God? In the wind? In the waves of Lake Ontario? In birdsong? In something someone says to us? In the teachings of our leaders? In music? On the Internet? In the normal noise of urban and suburban living? In silence? Are we willing to acknowledge that God can speak to us in all of these ways?

And of course God speaks to us through the Bible, the holy books of the Jewish and Christian people. Normally we encounter the Scriptures in written form—we are accustomed to reading the Bible. Do we realize, however, that most of the Bible began as oral proclamations and stories? And Scripture is still most alive when we hear it. Are we willing to listen to what God is saying through these sacred books?

Let's go back to our gospel. Jesus speaks of a man traveling abroad, who leaves his gatekeeper on the lookout for his return, which could be at any time. What have we heard in this reading? What did Jesus say to his first audience? What is he saying to us now? Would he be telling a different story if he were speaking in the Fairport of 2008? These are all important questions to ponder, because we believe that Jesus did speak to us today, here in Fairport, as the gospel was being proclaimed.

Of course we can still read the Bible. Spirit Alive, our diocesan spiritual renewal effort, is proposing that we read the entire Gospel of Mark in the coming months. In the pews are bookmarks that

offer a schedule for getting through the gospel. Notice that it doesn't say to read this or that portion; it says to reflect in it. An interesting distinction, isn't it? On the other side of the card is an introduction to Mark and some things to consider during our reflections.

You will have noted that I haven't proposed how God might fix our broken world or what God might want us to be doing. We may discover God's will through our listening together, through our willingness to be challenged and open to new ideas, for, as we've heard over and over, God's ways are not ours. This listening, this openness may unite us as a church far more than perfect agreement on any given issue. It is certainly worth trying.

So let us again keep silent for a few moments. Perhaps we will hear God's voice.

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