

Reading the Last Chapter First Isaiah 64: 1-9; Mark 13: 24-37

We are a society that is into time. We glance through the seasonal advertisements and there are any number of time-saving devices available for holiday gift giving. We are all given 24 hours each day to live and attempt with the latest technology to find a way to expand that. So, we wear watches guaranteed not to vary by more than two or three seconds a year. We have calendars, date books, hand-held computers and phones that become the master controllers of our lives.

In the Bible, writers talk in terms of generations instead of years, eons instead of days, and centuries instead of weeks. When Jesus is asked in our Mark 13 scripture about the length of time between the present moment and God's coming again, Jesus simply answers, "Keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come!"

It is easy to fall into the panic-filled trap of focusing on our idea on how little time there is before Christmas is here. It is important we remember that these four weeks of Advent have some order and method to them and if this time is used properly, our focus should be- not one of panic- but of anticipation. In these next Sundays, the Advent theme of waiting and preparation will be found in our worship and we will also celebrate the Lord's Supper today on this first Sunday of Advent, to remind us- to place a focus on- the real reason for this time- Christ's birth, death AND resurrection. This morning we lit the candle of hope on the Advent wreath and in upcoming weeks, we will also light the candles of peace, joy and love. There ARE some traditions we can trust will remain. While these church traditions may feel insignificant, they can be life changing if we patiently step back long enough taking time to wait and prepare our hearts for the greatest gift of all- God's gift of Jesus Christ.

I would guess most of us, when trying to decide if a new book is the one we would be interested in reading, we find ourselves scanning the last few pages- or maybe even the last chapter first. We often want to know how it ends. The lectionary scriptures for this first Sunday of Advent are a bit like reading the last chapter first.

Even though we speak of and enjoy the upcoming preparations that surround celebrating the birth of Christ- his First Advent- it is essential to our eternal future that we also prepare for the Second Advent of Christ.

As we turn once again to preparations that surround celebrating the birth of Christ, we find our scripture from Isaiah pleading with God for God to forgive and deliver the people while Mark records Jesus talking about preparing for the Second Advent- or second coming- of Christ. It is important to recognize that these can help place Christmas in a broader

theological context. Images of waiting and preparation then take on more meaning than simply a countdown of days. The last chapter- Christ's second coming- informs the content of our faith journey now. Advent begins by pondering the end. The refrain of Advent should be, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

The focus of the entire Advent season should not only be the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Christ in his First Advent, but also- and likely more importantly- the anticipation of the return of Jesus, the King in his Second Advent. Thus, this Advent time is far more than simply marking a two thousand year old event in history. It is celebrating a truth about God, the revelation of God in Christ to fulfill the destiny put in place before the beginning of time- that of all creation being reconciled to God.

It is so very tempting, however, to have this time of Advent focus simply on Christmas- the waiting and frantic preparation for Christmas- and once that day arrives, it is all over. We mark, during worship, our moving toward Christmas by lighting an additional candle each week until four are lit, leaving only the Christ Candle for Christmas Eve. While it is true that those four candles can point to significant aspects of Advent- hope, peace, joy and love- if their only value is to mark being one week closer to Christmas, is it appropriate that we make use of them? That is a bit like the calendars we use for our young children so they know how many more days until Christmas. However, those calendars purpose is likely so the children will quit asking us the same question over and over, "How many more days until Christmas?"

The first verses from Isaiah 64 are part of a larger prayer of lament. After Israel's return from Babylon, in the midst of chaos and unrest, Isaiah lifts a corporate plea to God on their behalf. The passionate plea to God for action begins Chapter 64. Isaiah seeks intervention by God that would cause the very creation to shake. It lifts up the awareness that God is unlike any other God. The prayer includes a theme of confession saying, "our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth....and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." The last two verses affirm that God is the Creator and that God's people are the clay molded in the hands of the great potter. The verses close with the plea, "Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever." The final words, "Now remember, we are all your people!" broadly holds it open for us, even today.

The verses from the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark pick up the theme- that of the end times- the apocalypse. In the first verses of Mark 13, Jesus came out of the temple and found the disciples admiring the large stones of the building. Jesus response- rather than joining in their admiration- is one of predicting the building's destruction saying, "not one

stone will be left here upon another...” Later in Chapter 13, Mark records that Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus privately when that destruction would happen with Jesus recounting a number of things that will take place first saying, “wars and rumors of wars...nation rising against nation, etc.” Jesus then gets more specific telling of trials, brother against brother, and persecution, with the promise that, “the one who endures to the end will be saved.” Our lectionary reading for today then finds Jesus telling them that amid the suffering and persecution, the earth and heavens are left to shake and the Son of Man will be seen “coming in clouds with great power and glory.” The second arrival of Christ marks the gathering of the faithful from the ends of the earth. Christ’s final word is clearly a word for us to emblazon on our minds, as he said, “And what I say to you; I say to all: Keep awake.” Christ warns we must be prepared since we do not know when that time will happen. Apocalyptic- or end time- literature is strangely relevant in our day, not because it predicts the end of time that is upon us, but because it offers hope for a future. History often seems lost and pointless, but the promise of the Second Coming of Christ affirms that God has a goal and a design for the progression of time impacting all creation.

Listening carefully to the words from Isaiah and from Mark, we can- without too much rewriting- realize they have meaning today, even though likely we would much rather ignore them and go on to the sparkling vision of Christmas and the cooing newborn in the cattle trough. In doing so, we incorrectly place our human concept on this child- this seemingly helpless child. In reality, the infant in the cattle trough was the Lord of heaven and earth with angels on high announcing his birth and wise men from the East bowing down before him. That is the attitude for which we strive this Advent season. God has acted! God has seen our sufferings as God saw the sufferings of the Israelites long ago. God came down in Jesus Christ- this tiny babe in all his humanness. As Christians, we know the happenings in the final chapter, thus, we CAN know and respond to the forgiveness and salvation from that overwhelming love! Because we believe and live for the final chapter of the Second Coming of Christ, we can place the first chapter- Jesus coming at Bethlehem- into the proper perspective. We know that celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ is only celebrating part of the great story of God’s love.

Our holiday mood is jarred and the verses from the prophet as well as Mark’s gospel seem out of place. A bit of confusion sets in as we are asked to process end-time images with the pleasantries of Thanksgiving Days of the past and the upcoming Christmas holidays.

The developers of the lectionary seem to have a purpose in mind...a purpose-as they do each year these Sundays of Advent- they choose scriptures which seem intended to grate against our comfort zone. If we listen to them with open ears and hearts rather than with irritation, we have to admit we may not be worthy of either the gift of Christ's birth or the promise of eternal life. In short, on this first Sunday of Advent- and in coming weeks- we must consider our standing in the sight of our God. Does God view us as far too selfish, far too proud, far too concerned with buying and getting, far too indifferent toward our God and our neighbors? Indeed, are we often far too anxious and fearful and concerned about our own welfare, when what we are really called to do is to trust our God in all things and to place our lives in God's hands?

During this Advent time, this time of preparation, may we strive to focus on more than the few verses of Jesus birth as found in Matthew and Luke. May we focus on the reason for that birth- our salvation- being reminded of it every day of our lives not just on a single Christmas Day. We have been given this time to read, reflect and look forward to the final chapters so we can fully and appropriately respond to the first chapter. In the meantime, Jesus words echo in our minds- "keep awake!"

It seems appropriate for us to be celebrating the Lord's Supper today since it too provides an opportunity to focus on the forward looking aspects of this Advent time. We do pretty well at remembering Christ's death part. But the clear theme of a kingdom meal, "the foretaste of glory divine," is present in the liturgy of the sacrament. We gather to give our gratitude to God for the promise of the Second Advent of Christ- a belief and promise which informs and enhances our celebration of the First Advent. We read and believe the last chapter in order that our perspective remains in proper focus for the first chapter.

Let us come to the table.....

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