

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
1st Sunday of Advent/Year B
December 3, 2017
Text: Mark 13:24-37

This year like every year, there was way too much food to be eaten Thanksgiving evening. Recipes from way back in the day were tried and tested with both a little bit of hesitancy and great expectation. Each dish turned out to be an A+ if I do say so myself. Mom would have been proud. Leftovers were parceled out to each household with some to be held over in the freezer until Christmas or savored and eaten the next day and the next and the next day still. On the short drive home I gave myself permission to turn on the Christmas station, 102.5, and then surprisingly and without hesitation, I searched for a Christmas movie to watch as soon as I settled in for the night.

The weather was gorgeous last weekend, Monday included, so like many others I began my Christmas prep. I went to my storage unit and pulled out most of my Christmas décor and loaded the car. Why not? Better to do it then, I thought, instead of doing the deed in thirty degree or lower temperatures. I felt a sense of glee for getting in the spirit and accomplishing so much so soon. (This rarely happens by the way!) It's Christmas time, let's do this! I said to myself that is until I began to open boxes and found almost immediately my Advent wreath, a reminder that there is a sort of holy countdown before the BIG day when the Church calls us to a season of waiting and hoping, of slowly down to reflect on the coming of Christ even though we also know that that means hustling and bustling to get things done is part of the season too. So I 'slowed my roll' as the younger generation says. My Christmas tree remains in its box... at least until tomorrow and matches are at the ready to light the first candle on the wreath this afternoon.

It is the First Sunday of Advent.

On the first Sunday of Advent we don't hear the voice of the Archangel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she has been chosen as the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer. Nor do we hear the voice of John the Baptist calling out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" Rather, the readings for the first Sunday of the Advent season are always about the end times. And with the beginning of a new church year and a new lectionary cycle we read these words of Jesus:

“In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

It has been almost 2,000 years since Jesus spoke these words to some of his disciples. As he went about his ministry, false prophets loomed everywhere. His people still waited anxiously for the promised Messiah to come to deliver them from Rome’s rule and return Israel to its former glory even though he stood *right there* in their midst. And he knew that the temple that his disciples and his people so admired would be reduced to rubble. At this point in Mark’s Gospel Jesus also anticipated what was about to happen in a matter of few days—that his own temple, he himself, would soon be handed over and crucified. He knew that things would soon be different. There would be *endings* but that there would also be new life on the horizon. So he told his followers to “... *keep alert... Keep awake.*”

Theologian Kathryn Matthews reminds us that

The author of the Gospel of Mark addresses a first-century community of Jewish and Gentile Christians who are facing persecution, and he urges them to endure their suffering by holding onto the sure and certain hope of Jesus' return in glory, when he will gather his "elect from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." In that same spirit, Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, reminds the Christians there that they have everything they need to wait faithfully for Christ's return, beginning and ending with God's own faithfulness to them. *God, he writes, is always faithful.**

Matthews goes on to say that our gospel passage and our lesson from Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians are not about the promise of an infant found lying in a manger and a host of angels lighting up the night sky. Nor are they about our Advent preparations for Christmas but that these readings are a clear reminder of our always being prepared for the newness of life in the “already-but-not-yet” of God’s reign. And to reassure us of the presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, even now as we await his final coming in glory.

For us that means that we are too are to: “... *keep alert... Keep awake.*” And we are to remain faithful as God is faithful. And live in joyful hope.

The world that Jesus knew was not all that different than the world in which we now live. Different peoples are at each other’s throats and injustices are still being carried out. Nations are rising against nations with war and threats of war and promises of continued terrorism and nuclear attacks. Earthquakes, floods, and

tornadoes have leveled cities too many to count, many of them left to right things for themselves still weeks after devastation. The millions who hunger continue to be hungry. The so-called powerful continue to jockey for the upper rung. If those things were not enough, there are the added effects of a changing ecosystem, the climbing number of sexual misconduct allegations, and the violence we are seeing is at record proportion. We live in a world of uncertainty, in a world where we cannot really be sure of anything. (Not that we were really sure in the first place.) All of these things leaving the world to groan in agony and us to mimic the cry of Isaiah: “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*” and we wonder when the end of the madness and messiness will cease.

And in all of this Jesus says, “*...keep alert... Keep awake.*”

Sisters and brothers, today’s Gospel reminds us that Advent is about more than getting ready for the celebration of Christ’s birth at Christmas. Advent is more than star gazing and fretting about when and how the world end. Advent more than any other time is a time for stillness, of longing for things that are wrong to be made right. Longing for that which is poised on the horizon and for the One who is with us even now-“Emmanuel”-which means, God with us. *He IS with us.*

“*Keep alert...Keep awake*” Jesus says to us, for we do not know the day or the hour when God will act and we could very well miss it. For in Christ, God is already here, already present, working to restore and inspire us to join in his handiwork, to make us and all creation new.

There is new life on the horizon. Remain faithful. Live in joyful hope. Don’t get caught sleeping. *Keep alert. Keep awake. Amen.*

*taken from an Advent Sermon by The Rev. Kathryn M. Matthews, 2015.