

It is the Advent season. This is a four week time period when we can prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is a time of anticipation where are to keep alert, that is, keep awake! Yet, before we get to the birth story later this month our gospel lesson this weekend tells us about the end of the story. This ending, dramatic as it is, heightens our anticipation of the birth of Jesus.

Let's break down our gospel lesson into three parts with perspectives that we can embrace throughout this Advent season.

Part I –The Coming of the Son of Man

Part II – The Lesson of the Fig Tree

Part III – The Necessity for Watchfulness or Keep Awake

Mark 13:24-27-

The Coming of the Son of Man (Encouragement)

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.

²⁷ 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.

These are words of encouragement. Do you see the reference to suffering? Yes, that suffering refers to the experience of the first generation Christians because they identified themselves as Christians and they shared the good news of Jesus Christ through their words and actions.

Many of the early Christians grew up Jewish, just as Jesus had. They embraced the fact that Jesus was the Messiah as predicted in their scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. As they did so they maintained a minority opinion in their culture. Most persons of faith in Judaism rejected the idea that Jesus was the Christ. Therefore, the first generation of Christians found themselves rejected in one fashion or another by their friends and family. That is some major suffering.

In addition, Roman officials found Christians to be convenient targets for persecution when they needed a scapegoat. When there was a flood, earthquake, or some other unexplainable disaster the citizens of Rome looked to the government for answers. When the leaders had no answers, it was easy to say that the gods were punishing everyone because of the Christians and their strange beliefs that denied the Romans gods.

As the Christians suffered they heard these words from Mark basically telling them to “hang in there” because Jesus would eventually come in on the clouds and save them. Those suffering Christians were encouraged by these words. Encouragement to endure difficulty until goodness emerges is a foundational piece of faith for persons in each generation, two thousand years ago and today. Christians are built for tough times; that's you and me.

Mark 13:28-31 –

The Lesson of the Fig Tree (Assurance & Confidence)

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

These verses indicate that the commonplace occurrences in life are to be signs of assurance and provide us with confidence. Just as leaves on a fig tree point to the coming of summer so the persecution and rejection that the first generation Christians experiences were to be seen as signs of the “Son of Man’s” rapid arrival.

We all have internal and external signs of assurance in our lives that provide us with confidence. What are the signs of assurance in your life? For me, externally, I look to people I trust and who care for me when I am in doubt or when I am choosing between two or more good options.

There are a number of church members and staff that I look to for insight and assurance when there is a church related decision to make. Then there are some colleagues and family members I look to for professional or personal matters. My number one source of assurance is Marjorie, my wife. She is my failsafe for diverting me from the wrong path. Why? That’s because she is so enthusiastic about the lion’s share of the choices I make that I know that when she lacks enthusiasm or says “no” then I am headed in the wrong direction.

Who are or what are the trustworthy external sources of assurance for you that provide you with confidence? For the first generation Christians they found assurance in the words of the gospel writer, Mark. In addition, they found assurance from their community of faith. That can be the case for us as we participate in Bible Study and prayer groups within our church community. In fact, as we are intentional about our spirituality we will also find that our internal source of assurance grows stronger. My internal source of assurance is the Christ spirit that makes sure that I take into account how my decisions impact others and not just myself. I would now like to look at the last verse of this passage about the lesson from the fig tree which reads, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” This verse can give us confidence. Just like the first generation of Christians we understand that the words and actions of Jesus reveal eternal truth to us. We can be confident that as we live our lives in harmony with the teachings of Jesus that we are on the right track. As Christians...

- we can confidently embrace people just as Jesus embraced the lepers that everyone else distanced themselves from.
- we can confidently forgive just as Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery when others were ready to stone her to death.
- we can confidently believe in others as Jesus saw the goodness in the actions of the woman who poured perfume on his feet as others ridiculed her.
- we can confidently engage in peaceful bridge building just like Jesus cited a Samaritan as a model of good conduct while others despised them as half-breeds.

We, as Christians, err on the side of idealism because we are confident that the words of Jesus contain eternal truth for the benefit of ourselves, others and the whole of God’s creation. Heaven and earth will pass away, but His words will not pass away.

Mark 13:32-37 –

Necessity for Staying Awake (Anticipation)

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come....³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

An ongoing theme of the Advent season is one of anticipation. The early Christians were reminded to not only anticipate the celebration of the birth of Jesus but to anticipate his return. In our age we anticipate how the presence of Christ might surface in our day to day activity. We can keep awake to the Christ spirit in the midst of our daily activity with as much excitement as a child anticipating Christmas gifts.

Let’s see how the Christ spirit popped into the life of a couple of nine year old boys. They live in Florida and were walking home from Sunday School on the first Sunday of Advent. Their Sunday School teacher taught them about Advent and the need to “keep awake” and anticipate the Christ presence in their midst.

As they were walking home they were talking about things other than the lesson from Sunday School. They talked about football games and gifts they hoped they would get for Christmas. As they were talking they stopped to say “hi” to a neighbor. He was an older man they knew and he was on his knees pulling weeds from around a large tree. He wore a frayed woolen jacket and a pair of worn garden gloves. His fingers were sticking out of the end of his gloves and were a little blue from the unusual December chill that morning.

As the older man, Harry, responded to the boys’ greetings he told them he was getting the yard in shape as a Christmas present to his wife who had passed away several years before. His eyes brimmed with tears as he patted the old tree. “My wife was all I had. She loved her yard and her trees, so I do this for her at Christmas.” His words touched the boys and soon they were down on their hands and knees helping him to weed around the trees. There it is, the Christ presence surfacing when least expected and the boys responded. The boys called their mothers and told her where they were and what they were doing. Lunch could wait. It took the three of them a good part of the afternoon to complete the task. When they finished, Harry pressed a couple of dollars into each of their hands. “I wish I could pay you more, but it’s all I got right now,” he said.

As the boys passed Harry’s house the next couple of Sundays they notice for the first time that Harry’s house was shabby, with no wreath, no Christmas tree or other decorations to add cheeriness, just the lonely figure of Harry sitting by his windows that had no curtains. The Sunday School teacher’s repeated lesson about the anticipation of Christ presence in Advent rang a bell for the boys as they passed Harry’s house again. They decided to put the dollars Harry gave them in a jar and marked it “Harry’s Christmas Present.” They did some small odd jobs throughout December. Every quarter and dollar they earned went into the jar. Two days before Christmas they had enough money to buy Harry some new gloves, a Christmas card and a wreath to hang on his door. With presents in hand they went to Harry’s door and started singing a Christmas carol. When Harry opened the door the boys gave him the wreath and he immediately placed it on his front door. Then they gave him the gloves in Christmas wrapping paper and the card. With trembling hands Harry tore the wrapping paper and saw the gloves. To their astonishment he held them to his face and wept.

How might the spirit of Christ surface in our lives this Advent season? With a sense of encouragement, assurance and confidence we can keep awake to the presence of Christ in our lives now as well as anticipate the coming of Christ on the clouds sometime in the days to come. Amen.