



First Sunday of Advent (B) – November 29, 2020

"Be watchful! Be alert!"

Question of the Week: *For what are you watching?*

- **Isaiah 63: 16b-17, 19b, 64: 2-7**
 - "You, Lord, are our Father."
- **Psalm 80: 2-3, 15-16, 18-19**
 - *R: Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.*
- **1 Corinthians 1:3-9**
 - He will keep you firm to the end.
- **Mark 13: 33-37**
 - "You do not know when the time will come."

Reading 1: Lament Song

How long, O Lord, how long?

We all have good times. And we all have bad times. 2001 was my bad time. Between the shooting at Santana High School (Santee, CA) my son witnessed, to the funerals my wife and I attended, to 9/11, the year seemed to be one long grieving period. A year with death in the air. A time to be endured.

Bad times like that give us a hint at the despair and desperation found in this reading. Several generations had passed from the return of the exiles in Babylon. Jerusalem and its Temple were being rebuilt. A sense of normal living had returned. Yet, the people were forlorn. Life was hard. And God seemed to be far away.

The author of these passages (the so-called "Third Isaiah") spoke the prayer of the people. How long before the people returned to glory? How long before God's presence shone before the nations? Note the prayer for divine intervention was mixed with self-examination. The loss of stature was not necessarily God's fault [64:5b-7]. Yet, also note the sense of hope.

The petitioner called upon God as Father and asked for his return [63:16-17].

Like those who lamented in Jerusalem, we, too, may have times we feel cut off from God and his blessing. Yet, there is always hope. For the Lord is coming. Soon!

Q: When did you experience "bad times?" How did God give you hope?

Psalm: Come, Lord, Restore Us

Q: How have you prayed in times of desperation? What were the results of those prayers?

There's a story about an airplane that spinning out of control. As the passengers realize they are about to die, some curse while some pray. While I admit this story probably began as a flight of fancy, it does clearly define how people react in times of desperation. Some look inward only to find despair. Others reach out to God.

Psalm 80 was a prayer of desperation, but not despair. The tone of the psalm revealed a weak Judea ravaged by its neighbors. This was the situation during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC). The Assyrians had swept away the



northern kingdom of Israel. The southern kingdom of Judea had been whittled away to the city-state of Jerusalem. The priest-cantor cried out to YHWH so he would restore the former glory of the kingdom.

In 80:1-3, the cantor implored the Shepherd of Israel to reveal himself to the areas of the northern kingdom of Israel and some of the lost regions of Judea (the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh). Notice revelation, power, and salvation were synonymous; as YHWH revealed himself, he would show his power (in the might of the armies of Judea?) and save his people. After these petition, the cantor sang the refrain (80:4) that would be repeated in 80:8 and 80:20; Lord, restore your people and let your face shine upon us (i.e., give us your blessings).

The psalm ended with a prayer for restoration. 80:15-19 returned to the theme of revelation and power. O Lord, return and fight against our enemies. Part of that restoration was a strong monarchy (80:18, the king who sat at the Lord's right hand). In response to the restoration, the cantor promises the fidelity of the people.

Psalm 80 was a prayer that grew out of desperate times, but not times of despair. It is not an inward reflection on hopelessness, but a cry to the Lord for help. The psalm looked forward to better days, when the Lord would restore his people.

We, too, look forward to times of happiness. We look forward to the return of the Lord in glory, at the end of time and at the celebration of Christmas.

Q: How can times like Advent restore your spirit?

Reading 2: The Power of God's Gift

1:6 "you will (certainly) not be lacking in any spiritual gift" The word "any" is actually "no."

Hence the clause has a double negative ("not...no"). This adds emphasis to the negative which the word "certainly" supplies in English.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians addressed the controversies that tore the community apart. As explained in last week's reflection, Corinth was a cosmopolitan port city. Not only was the city known for its multi-cultural mix, it was also known for its cult to Aphrodite and its fertility rites. The title of "Sin City" for Corinth would not be too far off the mark. St. Paul wrote the letter with an eye toward the city's nature, as much as the infighting among the cliques in the community.

St. Paul began all his letters with a standard greeting. While the salutation ("to" and "from") is not present in this reading (1:1-2), the greeting of God's "grace" (a reference of God's presence for the Greek Christians in his audience) and "peace" (a reference for the Jewish Christians) is listed.

Then, Paul reminded his readers of their privileged position before God. God's grace created a reciprocal relationship among the believers; it "enriched" the knowledge and speech of the followers as it caused a "confirmation" of faith. In other words, grace causes people to believe and it deepens their faith commitment. In fact, the deepening of faith in some of the community causes more faith among others. This was all a gift from God.

The "enrichment-confirmation" cycle grace created would sustain the Corinthians until the Final Judgment. And the Corinthians would stand innocent before in this Judgment. Why? God gave them his gracious gift and he could be trusted. After all, God created a bond of fellowship between believers and their Savior, Jesus Christ.

This brief introduction set up Paul's response to the first of many controversies addressed in the letter: the question of missionary authority.



We, like the Corinthians, must never forget the power of God's gift. God's very life changed us and sustains us with hope, even in the bleakest times. It gives us faith and deepens that gift.

Q: How has God's grace changed you? How has the deep faith of others helped your faith?

Gospel: Be Prepared

Q: What is the greatest hope in life? Why don't many people realize their hopes and dreams?

Between immediate gratification and long-term goals lies anticipation, the spirit that gives purpose to our daily routines. We will postpone today's pleasures when we can wait for something better. While we may not change our day to day lives in the short term, focused patience will help us achieve our goals in the long term. Anticipation requires persistence and vigilance.

What do we anticipate at the holidays? Quality family time? More toys? Or, something greater? The coming of the Lord.

13:33 "... traveling man ..." is literally "... a man away on a journey ..."

"... his slaves responsibility for their own tasks ..." is literally "... to his slaves authority, to each one his work ..."

"... he commanded to stay awake" is literally "... he gave the command so he might stay awake."

To begin this new liturgical cycle, Mark wrote a simple message: Stay awake for the Lord! These passages end Jesus' discourse on the end times. He introduced the destruction of the Temple (13:2, 7-9, 14-20), the persecution of faithful (13:9-13), the rise of the Anti-Christ (13:5-6, 21-23) and the Second Coming (13:24-26).

Mark laced the theme of watchfulness throughout the discourse.

In spite of the signs, Jesus urged an attitude, not a special knowledge of the right conditions for the Lord's return. Notice the text does not specify a time frame for the end. A close reading of Mark 13 lists conditions or events that can happen at different times, in different places.

Jesus told his followers to stay awake or keep a night watch. His command in the context of these passages has two implications. First, Jesus urged his followers to look for a future event. In a culture that concentrated only on present (and pressing) conditions, future events were shoved out of mind. What could be put off until tomorrow usually was delayed. When the subject of the end times arose, however, Jesus railed against procrastination. While we moderns may feel comfortable with the future-oriented mentality of his message, Jesus shocked his contemporaries. [13:33]

Second, Jesus implied the keep of a night watch for a house. The term "house" referred to a family as well as a dwelling. [13:34-35] To Mark's audience of now-Jewish Christians, the local faithful met as a house-church. Distant from their Jewish roots and ignored by their contemporaries, Mark's audience gathered in someone's home, like an extended family. The master of the house (i.e., the ascended Lord) may have been gone, but he left everyone with a ministry, including the doorman who barred the door to the outside so all could be safe. (An interesting side note: the doorman or porter in the early church had the power to admit the faithful. He was a lookout, alerting the community to any outside danger. And, like a sergeant-at-arms, he also had the responsibility to maintain order at church functions. The office of porter was an ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church until it was suppressed in the late 1960's.) [13:34]



The night of the watch resonated with Mark's community. It symbolized social prejudice and persecution. Alone and afraid, this community looked throughout the dark night for the coming of their Savior, so justice would reign. But, when would the Lord return? Just after the persecution began, in the midst of the troubles, or when the community seemed doomed? The four watches of the night listed in 13:35 (evening or 6:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., the middle of the night or 9:00 P.M. to midnight, the cock-crowing time or midnight to 3:00 P.M., and dawn or 3:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M.) indicated increasing darkness. Symbolically, they symbolized deeper despair or resignation in the community. The community would focus more upon their own problems than an expectation for the Lord. Fear would induce a "sleep," as ministry lost its sense of mission.

(An alternate interpretation saw the darkness of night as complacency in a spiritually dying community. Without focus or purpose, such a community would become exclusive and stagnate. The followers would "fall asleep," and ministry would lose its vitality.) [13:34-35]

No matter how we interpret 13:35, Mark focused upon expectation. How would the returning Lord be welcomed? Would the servants be doing their work? Or would fear and complacency cause a "slumber" in ministry? A ministry either too timid to be of use or on "automatic" is not effective at all. So, Jesus warned against those in ministry would lose their edge. We who serve others should stay vigilant. [13:36-37]

Catechism Theme: Hope of a New Heaven and a New Earth (CCC 1042-1050)

Hope is the basis for a watchful and vigilant spirit. The Lord will come. And in the blink of an eye, God will change everything. We will truly become the "body of Christ," risen and glorified together, for we will live forever with the Father. As God renews us, he will also renew the universe to its pristine state. The

Father will transform both humanity and nature to the way he intended them to be from the first moment of creation--free from sin, sickness, and death--free from the consequences of evil.

In our anticipation for the Lord's coming, we hope that our faith will help reveal the Kingdom and prepare others for eternity. Our efforts alone will not bring about the Kingdom, as if we humans can progress or evolve to a higher plane by ourselves. But, God, acting through us, will reveal and realize the Kingdom. Then, we act according to his will, we add our contribution to his activity.

Q: What is your greatest hope for the holidays? How does your hope match God's? Explain.

Obviously, our anticipation for the Lord cannot be reduced to a plan or process that will guarantee a certain result. God has his own ways. If we wish to participate in the Lord's plan, anticipate his coming, we need the virtue of patient vigilance. To watch for the Lord in this way requires prayer, reflective discernment, and the gifts and fruits of the Spirit, those charisms that serve others. Prayer opens us to God's will. Reflective discernment helps point us the way of his will. And the gifts God gave us for the good of others help us to realize the Lord in others. When we can see a glimpse of the Lord in our service, we will be able to recognize his return and celebrate it in joy.

Q: What do you want for Christmas? Take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns. Mark one column "Mine" and the other "God's." Now make an honest list of your wants and desires for the holidays. You may be surprised how many things you list under "God's" column. Pray over your list as you prepare for the Christmas. And get ready for the coming of the Lord.