

LIFE IN THE MEAN TIME - Mark 13: 24-37
First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + Pastor Roy Almquist

One reason there is so little excitement in the lives of many Christians today is that there is very little sense of expectation. The expectation of something new and wonderful has either been drown in a wave of skepticism or it has been transferred to the worldly dimensions of our lives. It would appear that we are no longer a people who live and wait with great anticipation that God is going to do something with and for us.

Today **excitement** is something we associate with tickets to a sports event or a concert, watching **Dancing With The Stars**, or the prospect of a new kitchen with granite counter tops. Excitement is generally connected with **items or experiences** purchased rather than **relationships** fostered and deepened. And that is our loss. In faith we are invited to find excitement in our relationship to Jesus Christ. How sad that most of us simply settle for going to church!

Several years ago Shannon and I had a chance to spend some time in India. Our wonderful time in that amazing country came back to us this week as we suffered with the Indian people the terrible tragedy in Mumbai. One aspect of Indian culture that has always stayed with me is the painstaking way in which an Indian woman will prepare food for her family. She will spend the entire day gathering, washing, slicing and then carefully cooking the vegetables, the rice, and the spices that will form the evening meal. Every act is an outpouring of love by the woman for her family. "Fast-food" would be a sacrilege in an Indian household.

Where do we find in our culture such a similar blending of faith and love in a visible act of commitment? What do we ever do that represents that kind of an investment of our lives for others?

This morning we begin a new Church Year with the celebration of **The First Sunday in Advent**. Our Creator God intended that every one of us would live a life filled with purpose and excitement. Jesus stated his expectation clearly when he said: *I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly* [John 10:10], and in another place, *Behold, I make all things new* [Revelations 21: 5]. How wonderful it would be if we could live our lives with this kind of positive expectations!

Our Gospel lesson for this morning comes from Mark 13, a portion of Scripture that William Barclay, the great Biblical theologian, has called - *one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament for a modern reader to understand* [William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 317]. In chapter 13 Mark speaks about *grim and terrible things that are to happen at the end of time when Jesus will come again*. We are told there will be *wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, earthquakes, famines, and an imbalance on the earth*. It sounds like CNN's *Situation Room* with Wolf Blitzer on any given night.

Texts like this have caused great confusion in the Christian Church. There are legions of people who read Mark 13 and devoutly believe that we are living in the **last days**, that the **end of the world** is just around the corner, and perhaps, in a bizarre happening called **The Rapture**, some of us will be taken up to heaven suddenly while others are left behind.

Christ will come again. That is central to our faith as Christians. Indeed, we proclaim this expectation every time we recite the **Apostles' Creed** and the **Lord's Prayer**. But Jesus never sought to frighten anyone, nor did he proclaim a **vengeful God** who is intent upon destroying the world. Our Lord never encouraged us to withdraw from the world, but rather to engage the world, working for peace, practicing compassion toward those at the margins, and seeking to live in harmony with all people. Jesus never prepared us to be lifted out of this world, but promises to walk with us through whatever may befall us in this life.

I have never given very much thought to **the world ending in my lifetime**, but I am certainly intrigued by the reality that **my lifetime in this world will end**. Each of us is closer to the end of our lives today than we have ever been before. We should be mindful of this reality, but I fear we Americans are a **death-denying culture**. Nevertheless, the **mortality of the human race continues to be 100%** and that has direct bearing on every one gathered in the sanctuary this morning.

But whether Jesus comes with all his angels to bring an end to the world or whether Jesus, the tender Shepherd, gently comes to us at the time of our death, I think the result is the same. St. Paul said it so beautifully when he wrote to the Christians in Rome: *Whether I live or whether I die, I belong to the Lord* [Romans 14: 8].

I firmly believe that Scripture is neither a **road map for eternity** nor a **timetable to the future**. But I believe our Lord has something significant to say to us this morning. Jesus tells us to live our lives wisely and well. That is why the central theme of the Advent Season is - **Be on watch**.

The question of how we ought to live is addressed in that little parable of Jesus we find wrapped in the midst of this morning's Gospel lesson. You may remember Our Lord told a story about a landowner who went away for a while and entrusted his property to responsible servants. They were directed to be on watch so that they might anticipate the landowner's return. That is the example Jesus places before us as a guide to how we ought to live.

Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. [13: 35-37]

We need to be like those men who knew that their master would return, but who did not know the day when he would come back. We live in the shadow of eternity. We do not need to be hysterical or fearful. But we do need to live without regrets and devoid of excuses. We need to live so that it does not matter whether the Lord comes again or we simply go to be with the Lord -- **we will be ready.**

This means we must be very careful not to get so immersed in the responsibilities of this life that we forget God. When Jesus tells us to **be watchful and keep awake**, it is not a warning to have our crash helmet ready and three weeks' worth of food stored in the bomb shelter. No, Jesus is telling us to be alert so that we will know **when the kingdom of God is near.**

I am convinced that the **Kingdom of God** is not something we enter when we die .. **we are living in the Kingdom of God right now.** By virtue of our Baptism, we are united with Our Lord in what we call the Body of Christ. We are called to be the arms and the legs of Jesus in the world, his mouth and his heart, as we carry our Savior's love into all those places where he would have us go. Just as Jesus announced at the start of his ministry: **The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come, repent and believe the Gospel** [Mark 1: 15], so we must give witness to the Lord in all that we say and do.

So, let us be of good cheer. Let us not be tense and dread-filled, acting as if we have no hope. Let us not be resigned or give ourselves over to the crazed speculations about the *end of time*. But, instead, let us be wide-awake, as fully alive as we can be. ***Let us expect great things from God .. and let us attempt great things for God.*** AMEN.

