

First Sunday of Advent: November 29, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Gospel Reflection (*Mark 13: 33-37*)

In this liturgical year, we focus on the Gospel of Mark. It was the first of the four Gospels and a source used later by Matthew and Luke. Mark's Gospel was most likely written after the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE, probably to and for a Christian community in the Roman province of Syria. The brevity and urgency of Mark's Gospel suggest that this church believed that Jesus would be returning very soon. In Mark's gospel, Jesus challenges these Christians—and subsequent readers of the Gospel—to live a radical, here-and-now discipleship, as if there is no tomorrow.

Throughout Mark's account, he incorporates themes that resounded strongly with the early Christians. First, Mark presents Jesus as fully human: Jesus gets angry, he cries, he eats, he gets discouraged. Second, Mark emphasizes that trust is the core of discipleship. Time after time, the disciples are blind to Jesus as Son of God and have difficulty trusting him. Their growth into this trust throughout the Gospel is slow and painful to watch. And third, Mark presents service to others as how Jesus' followers should follow him—how they should take up the cross.

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent is taken from Chapter 13 of Mark — a pivotal section in the overall structure of the gospel. The chapters that precede it describe Jesus's public ministry; the chapters that follow present the last week of his life. In the first verses of this chapter (not included in the Gospel for the day), Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. What we — the present-day readers of Mark — might miss is that, for the early church, this event was a potent sign of the imminent end of the world. The Christians for whom Mark was writing had already witnessed that very destruction; therefore, it was quite logical for them to assume that if this much of Jesus' prediction had been fulfilled, the rest must be on the horizon. In fact, Jesus says as much: "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

So when Jesus tells his disciples to watch and wait, there is an immediacy in his words. Yes, the temple will be destroyed and desecrated; yes, a time of great suffering will follow. But new signs will appear, the Son of Man will arrive and all will be made right. And since we don't know exactly when this will occur, we must stay alert—we must watch and wait.

Watching and waiting. These are not actions that we as individuals take up easily. Neither of them is an activity that we as a culture do well. We've watched and waited in apprehension; we've watched and waited in anticipation. But now we are tired of watching; we've done enough waiting—we want finality and we want it now. Perhaps more than anything, though, we want some small piece of good news.

So we live in a world that focuses on the *now* while we are urged by Jesus to look to the future. More than any other season, Advent is a time of chronological dissonance. And perhaps the discomfort of that dissonance can remind us of what we are really waiting for. Reminders are found throughout the Gospel readings for the season: John the Baptist declaring that “one mightier than I is coming after me;” Gabriel promising that “the child born to you will be called holy, the Son of God;” the angels announcing to the shepherds that “a savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord;” and John the Evangelist finally proclaiming that “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.”

We must learn to separate the negative, anxious waiting of our 2020 lives from the peaceful, prayerful waiting of Advent. Because what we are really waiting for is the deeper faith realization that the birth of Jesus Christ in time is not just some small piece of good news; it is the ultimate Good News. Let us watch and wait together.

Janice Bonner