

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

November 30, 2008

Proper Advent 1B 2008

In the Name of our One Living God – mysterious beyond knowing – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Gospel lesson that opens this new Church Year is about end times – with the sun and moon darkening and the stars falling from heaven and the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great glory. Jesus tells his followers to be aware, to keep alert and to keep awake for no one knows the day and the hour, but only the Father. Opening the year with this message is certainly a way to get one's attention as we await the coming of the Christ child.

It is helpful to put today's lesson in context. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem just prior to his arrest. Coming out of the Temple, one of his disciples says in wonder, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" The disciple probably expected Jesus to share in his appreciation of the grandeur of the Temple. But Jesus answers, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." It is later when the inner circle – Peter, James, John and Andrew – ask Jesus when this will happen and what will be the signs that Jesus gives today's talk of end times.

What Jesus was saying about the Temple was unthinkable to his Disciples and to any Jew. The Temple was the center of religious life, the point of connection between the people and God. It was where God met God's people and dwelt in the Holy of Holies. Jesus taught in the Temple and later in the Book of Acts so did the Apostles because it was the center of Jewish religious and cultural life. Jesus'

prediction of the destruction of the Temple followed by cosmic destruction would throw his followers into total confusion – into the unknowable. If they couldn't count on the Temple and its cult, on what could they rely? It was simply unimaginable and terrifying.

Isn't that a question we often ask ourselves when we face disappointment or loss? What is there on which I can really rely? What we are really asking is, "What is there around which I can reliably organize my life?" We all need something to believe in, something in which we can place our trust and hope. It is important to know that Mark, the first Gospel written, was written most probably at the time of the actual destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70AD or shortly thereafter. The questions were "What now? Where is God and how can we connect with the Divine?" "How can I find something beyond myself upon which I can rely?" These are the Advent questions; questions we ask ourselves through out our lives when we feel disoriented.

Our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures is from the Book of Isaiah. It was most probably written around 530BC when the Jews returned from captivity to Jerusalem. Seeing the devastation, the prophet cries out for God to intervene and help: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" It is a lament over the past as the prophet looks out to find the land desolate and the Temple destroyed. The prophet acknowledges the nations sins that brought this calamity down upon themselves. He yearns for God to again be present with great power and protective strength as in the days of Moses and the Exodus. In many ways, Isaiah cries out in despair and confusion – God has seemed so absent for so long. Ironically, God is also sometimes most present when we feel and acknowledge God's absence from our lives – usually at times of disappointment, loss and confusion.

The paradox is that in the sense of absence we find the hope of presence. The passage ends with a note of hope for despite their mistakes and wrongs, God is still their Father; God is the potter and the people are the clay: “We are all the work of your hand.” In their lament they pray that God comes back to them. In their prayer of repentance is hope – God didn’t leave them; they left God by worshipping other gods – God is still there and their father.

Advent is a time of waiting, of knowing and acknowledging the darkness and fear of our individual and corporate lives. In these difficult economic times, in these days of terrorism and violence, we may all be feeling a sense of loss and disorientation. We may feel both an absence of God and our need of God. Like the ancient Israelites, as a society we may have gone chasing after other gods that are now found wanting. This time of year the stores and the media want to distract us from reality; but it is into our real lives and our real world that Christ wants to come.

A recent news article brought this home to me. Last Friday, the day after Thanksgiving (when we thank God for all God’s gifts and our reliance on God), this country celebrated another – newer - holiday now called “Black Friday” when the Christmas shopping season begins with what are now called “Doorbuster Sales”. At 4:55am an unruly mob of over 2000 would be shoppers at the Wal-Mart in Valley Stream, Long Island, pushed against the glass panel doors as Wal-Mart employees tried to hold the doors shut before the 5am opening. The doors gave way and the crowds stormed in – trampling to death Jimmy Damour, 34, a Haitian immigrant who got some seasonal work at Wal-Mart. Other employees who went to his aid were also injured. Later, the store manager announced the closure of the store because of the death. This was met with obscenities and complaints that they had waited all night;

after all **they** had waited all night to shop! It was unfair to now close the store because of a death!

If ever there was a need for doing Advent – a season of reflection, facing our fears and repentance that give rise to hope – it is now. Last Sunday’s Gospel lesson had Jesus separating the goats and the sheep at the last judgment based on their acts of compassion and aid toward the suffering and most vulnerable or their failure to do so. This week a crowd of 2,000 people trampled to death a minimum wage temporary worker to get bargain priced large screen LCD televisions and other goodies. These weren’t felons at a prison riot; they were suburbanites!

When I hear stories like that, I feel the absence of God and the loss of goodness in my culture. If ever there is a need for hope, for churches that believe Christmas is not a commemoration of something that happened long ago and far away but God seeking to come into our world and our lives, it is now.

After this week’s events, perhaps Advent is a good time to reflect on who is our God and what are we really thankful for? If we fail to do that, we may well consign ourselves to that place which C.S. Lewis once described as a land where “it must always be winter and never Christmas.”

Amen