

BE READY!

Isaiah 64:1-9, OT p. 694
 Mark 13:24-37, NT p. 50

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 First Sunday of Advent
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They take their faith very seriously. The Orthodox strand of the Christian faith has high expectations for daily life and a physically and mentally demanding worship service on Sunday. The frequent fasts help members to prepare to receive Christ and to focus on prayer and giving to those in need. The worship service involves all the senses, with icons that serve as windows into the eternal realm, incense to lift the prayers to God, music and words from ancient times, and movements, from the sign of the cross, to kneeling, to processions of the clergy and acolytes. One thing that the Eastern Church has never expected, though, is that all people learn the original language. The church spread by translating the divine liturgy into native languages in Europe and Asia, and even the languages of Alaskan native groups, when the Russian Orthodox missionaries followed the fur traders to the shores of Alaska in the eighteenth century. Fr. James, a Russian Orthodox priest, uses several different languages in worship, to reflect the heritage of the members of his parish in San Francisco. The Orthodox Church is a demanding and yet joyous expression of the Christian faith.

Watch! Be ready! Jesus said. He calls us all to a more serious, life-changing kind of faith. Chapter 13 of Mark is one of those I'd rather not preach from. The apocalyptic, end-of-the-world language can be confusing, especially when mixed in with warnings about the destruction of the temple that happened in AD 70. These words are often distorted by those who try to predict the end of the world based on current events, and they are ignored by those who can't imagine the return of a physical Jesus or a sudden end to the world in which we live. And yet it is Scripture. So what is the church to do with it?

Watch! Be ready! In these words, the church as a whole and individual followers of Jesus may find both warning and comfort. Those who hope in a literal coming of Christ look for the time when injustices will be put right, when the meaning of tragedy and of life itself will be made plain. The African slaves and many other people

suffering oppression have clung to that hope.

Those for whom Christ's coming is not so literal find guidance for present life. This is where I find myself, and I have felt odd about saying that, since I grew up with some quite scary descriptions of the end of the world. It could be that this hope for a literal return made sense for that very different time and place, with implications we can't really understand. And yet Jesus calls us practical people also to "Watch! Be ready!" In colonial New England, during a solar eclipse, the legislators in one state panicked and several moved to adjourn. But one of them said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought."¹

These words of Jesus, "Watch! Be ready!" are guidelines for our present lives. We are to be busy with the work that God has given to us. That is what several of our recent Matthew readings have emphasized. At St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Beaverton, they have a tradition of Christmas caroling for the seniors and shut-ins. And the families of the parish make hundreds of lunches that also include socks and toiletries which the young people distribute to homeless individuals in downtown Portland. According to Fran's daughter-in-law, "It's a blessing for the kids to meet these needy individuals face-to-face to see that they're just people like us." If Advent is a time of waiting, it is an active, on-going waiting. If we don't look forward to a literal return of Christ, still he meets us in our responsibilities every day.

A third option is to understand the coming of the Son of Man as a personalized event, wherever Christ comes to us B in tragedy, in joy, in a call to service, and daily as we see Christ in the face of the least of these. "Watch! Be ready!" can emphasize the rule of God in our own lives. If at some point it seems that our personal world has ended, we can watch and be ready, and trust God to make things new for us. And at the end of life, we believe that Christ is there,

¹*Ibid.*, p. 242.

the same one who has been with us all the way.

Watch! Be ready! Whatever our perspective on these words, they are surely meant to encourage us and to strengthen our faith and service in the present. So what does this have to do with Advent and Christmas? This year, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we are even more aware of the economic gaps between rich and poor, young and old. We have seen people across the country determined to demonstrate and speak against economic injustice, while financial and political leaders seem paralyzed. The local Food Bank's resources are stretched, and the jobless rate here remains high. While we wait for God to act, we can speak and work for justice ourselves, where we are. We can be willing to listen carefully to those whose lives have been impacted by discrimination, loss of work, lack of education. When we give to charity, let's be sure that we are giving what people need and in ways that honor their dignity and give them hope.

As we watch for signs of Christ's presence, let us use our Advent waiting to examine our own lives, so that we may be more faithful to the gospel. The Orthodox Christians observe a 40-day fast before their Christmas celebration, very similar to what they observe during Lent. This fast is a time of reflection, self-restraint, and inner healing. We can learn from their emphasis on preparation. We might choose not to over-indulge in food and drink. We might think more carefully about how to honor God in our gift-giving and in our gifts to charity, and in our daily conversations. As St. John Chrysostom said, self-restraint in what we eat is of no benefit if we do not exercise restraint in how we speak to our brothers and sisters.

In this time of reflection and preparation, you might try an ancient spiritual practice called *examen*. This is an evening prayer time, to review the day, to give thanks and ask forgiveness. I know it's easier to fall into bed exhausted, or to fall asleep on the couch during the late news. I've certainly done that! But *examen* can help us put the day in a spiritual perspective. An evening hymn, "All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night,"² is that kind of

²All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night, p. 542, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*.

prayer. It begins with thanksgiving, requests God=s protection and asks forgiveness.

All praise to thee, my God, this night, for all the blessings of the light!
Keep me, O keep me safe from harm within the shelter of Thine arm!
Forgive me, Lord, through Christ, I pray, the wrong that I have done this day,
That I, before I sleep, may be at peace with neighbor, self, and Thee.

Advent is a time to let God prepare us B for a deeper faith in Christ, a more honest look at ourselves, and a greater spirit of love toward our neighbor, so that, as the hymn says, we Amay be at peace with neighbor, self, and Thee.@ If we do no other preparation for Christmas except to pray and live that prayer, we will be ready for the coming of Christ to us. May we watch and be ready to meet Christ with joy.

Let us pray. Eternal God, we look forward in hope to your day of justice and peace. Until that time, may we be awake and alert, living holy and joyful lives, and sharing the good news of Christ=s peace. Amen.