

The Reverend Beth Lind Foote
First Sunday in Advent, Year B
November 27, 2011
Isaiah 64: 1-9
Psalm 80: 1-8, 16-18
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13: 24-37

Happy Thanksgiving! Happy Advent! And Happy New Year!

Happy Church New Year, that is. In the Episcopal Church, like almost all the other liturgical churches, we follow the three year cycle of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary. Today on the first Sunday of Advent, we shift from Year A, where we primarily read from the Gospel of Matthew, to Year B, where we primarily read from the Gospel of Mark. In Year C we read from Luke, and the Gospel of John is read every year from Lent to Pentecost.

This three year cycle of the lectionary is ancient, and is more than a random arrangement of readings on the calendar. Each year on the cycle takes us on a spiritual journey as a church. According to

the biblical scholar Alexander Shaia, each of the four gospels addresses a question that arose from the community in which they were written. The Gospel of Matthew addresses the question, “How do we approach change?” The Gospel of Mark responds to, “How do we move through suffering?” The Gospel of Luke asks, “How can we mature in service?” and The Gospel of John asks, “How do we receive joy?” So today, we begin reading Mark and consider how we move through suffering. What does that have to do with Advent, and waiting for the birth of the Christ child?

The Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel to be written, in the 1st Century by members of the early Christian community in Rome, who faced brutal persecution in the Circus Maximus under Emperor Nero. How do you face such terror? This is where the theme of moving through suffering in the Gospel of Mark comes from. The people of Mark’s community experienced the presence of Christ in the most dire of circumstances.

Today's Gospel reading from Mark is part of what is known as "the Little Apocalypse." Jesus is talking to his disciples just before his final entry into Jerusalem, and his death on the cross. The Markan community identified with Jesus' anticipation of suffering as they faced death in the persecutions.

I think that when we hear this text today we automatically associate it with the popular fundamentalist Christian "end of the world/apocalyptic" false prophets of our own time and it offends our mainline Christian sensibilities. But its theme of darkness vs. light really does go with Advent, when the days get shorter and shorter. As we can see in the collect from today "put on the armor of light," one of the major themes of Advent is light vs. the darkness.

Today in the “Little Apocolypse,” we hear about the “darkening” of the sun, and how the “moon will not give its light.” And we hear the mini-parable about the master of a house going on a journey and leaving his slaves in charge. They do not know when the master will return. Notice the phrases, “in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,” that describe each station throughout the watches of the night. (If you are an insomniac, or have tended a newborn, you know all those stations.) The slaves must remain vigilant throughout the darkness of the night, and the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel addresses his disciples, and us saying, “And what I say to you I say to all is: Keep awake!” In other words, be faithful and keep watch for the presence of Christ in the darkness.

Most of us 21st Century Christians are not facing torture and persecution. But our world has some similarities to the world of the 1st century, which brought forth Mark’s Gospel. Alexander Shaia describes the 1st century as a time of extreme tension,

anxiety, inflexible “either/or” thinking, and a time when the old rules didn’t work and the new rules were not evident yet. In such a time, people isolate themselves and hunker down. It certainly sounds familiar to me. Our political world has become even more polarized in recent days. The economy lurches downward while congress throws up its hands and refuses to agree on anything. The old rules don’t seem to work and the new rules have not yet emerged. It feels rather dark as we enter this season of Advent.

But darkness is not all bad. Shaia says that in the Jewish tradition, darkness is a place of beginnings. Life begins in the darkness of the womb. Genesis begins with darkness. Scientists believe that 95% of the universe is “dark matter,” out of which new galaxies emerge. Perhaps we need to accept darkness as something mysterious and creative rather than just the opposite of light.

Within the darkness, something new is emerging in us and through us.

So in this place of darkness we keep watch for the coming of Christ. We await the birth of the Christ child at Christmas, but we also await and witness to the reality of Christ “coming again,” among us. Where do I see Christ emerging among us in these uncertain times?

This last week I could see Christ in the non-violent protests of the students at UC Davis, and their non-violent response to the cruel pepper-spraying by campus police. Instead of rioting that night, hundreds of students silently stood vigil linking arms while the chancellor walked to her car.

And I also saw Christ in the actions of The Rev. Kristin Stoneking, the young chaplain at UC Davis who silently escorted the UC Chancellor to her car after mediating between the students and the frightened administrators.

Chaplain Stoneking wrote in her blog last week, *“Why did I walk the Chancellor to her car? Because I believe in the humanity of all persons. Because I believe that people should be assisted when they are afraid. Because I believe that in showing compassion we embrace a nonviolent way of life that emanates to those whom we refuse to see as enemies and in turn leads to the change that we all seek.”*

Assist others who are afraid. Show compassion. Embrace a nonviolent way of life. It sounds like our Baptismal Covenant.

Our reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians gives us courage to face these trying times. “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

If God is faithful, we can be faithful, and we can keep awake this Advent for signs of Christ coming into the world. We can Keep awake this Advent for ways we are being asked to be Christ in the world. We can Keep awake this Advent in the knowledge that Christ is always with us, as we share in the Eucharist together, and when we go out this morning bearing Christ to others. Happy Thanksgiving. Happy Advent. Happy New Year! Amen.