

# "Advent Waiting"

Mark 13:24-37

November 30, 2008

**A woman and her daughter were out Christmas shopping on the day after Thanksgiving. Just as everyone had predicted, the crowds were awful. They had to skip lunch because they were on a tight schedule. Toward the end of the day, Mom was hungry, tired and her feet were killing her. She was getting more and more irritable. As they left the last store, she turned to her daughter and asked, "Did you see the nasty look that salesman gave me?" Her daughter answered, "He didn't give it to you, Mom. You had it when you went in."**

**Well, we have moved into the thick of it! I hope that you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving and an exciting and restful 'black Friday'. I wonder who came up with 'black Friday' to describe the day after Thanksgiving --- it must have been someone who really wanted the 5:00 AM Doorbuster special and did not get it.**

**It does surprise me though that you run into people who seem to be really shocked and unnerved by what they encounter in the wee hours of the morning on 'black Friday'. Certainly, we have been through this long enough to know exactly what to expect and I should imagine that folks would just smile and go with the flow as they encounter that annual ritual. But still it seems to catch some people by surprise.**

**In many ways that is the theme of today's Gospel. It is again an incredibly difficult scripture text .... and perhaps beyond difficult, it can be just plain disturbing. These words come right from the midst of the events of Holy Week [a fact that is also somewhat surprising when we want to be gearing up for the baby lying quietly in the manger in Bethlehem]. As Jesus anticipates His eminent arrest and crucifixion, He wants to point His disciples to the fact that He will come again with great power and glory. From the earliest days of the Christian church believers have held by faith the conviction that Jesus would return as victorious Lord of All. It is in part what we remind ourselves of each Advent as we talk about waiting for the coming of Jesus. And even though that is a happy thought for us as believers, this Gospel text is really dark and forbidding. The text opens with images that seem to point to the complete destruction of the universe in which we live. The sun and moon go dark and the stars fall from the sky - heaven and earth pass away. And into that dark scenario we see the "Son of Man coming in the clouds". At the very least we have to see this as an absolutely incredible image. But it is my hope that we can see beyond that so that we can actually hear the words of hope and encouragement that they offer us in our Advent journey which happens not only between Thanksgiving and Christmas but all year long.**

The good news that we proclaim is that Christ will come. The word of encouragement that we need to hear as we wait is 'keep awake'.

I ran into an amusing Hasidic story about a rabbi who crossed a village square every morning on his way to the temple to pray. One morning, a large Russian Cossack soldier, who happened to be in a vile mood, accosted him, saying, "Hey, rabbi, where are you going?" The rabbi simply said, "I don't know." This infuriated the soldier. "What do you mean, you don't know? Every morning for twenty-five years you have crossed the village square and gone to the temple to pray. Don't fool with me. Why are you telling me you don't know?" He grabbed the old rabbi by the coat and dragged him off to jail. Just as the Cossack was about to push him into the cell, the rabbi turned to him, and softly said, "You see, I didn't know."

I really like the story because it brings reality into focus. We live lives that often we get very comfortable with. We have a routine and think we know what is going to happen with our day. But in fact, we never really know what the day, the week or the year will hold. Today may be the day that we are arrested for crossing the village square .... or it may not. Today may be as routine as a thousand other days .... or it may not. Today may be the day that the stars fall from the sky and the sun and moon cease to shine .... or it may not. With that as a reality, our God calls us to keep awake.

Surprising stuff - - - these words from scripture. We can nod in simple agreement because it is after all the Bible - but really not take it too seriously because we have been saying such things every year for centuries. Or perhaps we can really sit up and take notice because we have seen the many ways in which the stars have fallen from the sky and we need and long for our Savior to come.

In *The Women of Faith Daily Devotional* there is a story of a woman who ran into a friend that she had not seen for several months. They hugged and chatted about the day. Then she asked me if she had heard the news. The 'news' was that the friend was pregnant. It should be great news and normally would be associated with tears of joy. But both women knew the story. Both women remembered the last baby girl that this woman had delivered and how that child had been born with a rare genetic disease that made it impossible for the child to live to see her first birthday. The couple had tried desperately not to conceive again ... but there it was and the test that had been done already revealed that this child would also carry that same genetic defect. This baby that they longed for so deeply would also be born only to be claimed by that rare illness and death.

The two women wept together. But the pregnant woman revealed her faith as she spoke of a peace that had rested on her. She said, "If this life was all we had, I would have no hope at all," she said. "But this is just the rehearsal for our real life."

**I suspect that there could be a million such stories. Sometimes the sun and moon grow dark and the stars fall from the sky in our lives. It can happen at the least expected times. But there God come with power and glory. Are you ready to witness it?**

**There is a story about a British explorer who took a team on an expedition to the South Pole. His name was Sir Ernest Shackleton and because of difficulties they encountered he was forced to leave a few men on Elephant Island, promising that he would return. Later, when he tried to go back, huge icebergs blocked the way. But he kept trying to get to his men and suddenly, as if by a miracle, an avenue opened in the ice and Shackleton was able to get through. His men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard. No sooner had the ship cleared the island than the ice crashed together behind them. Contemplating their narrow escape, the explorer said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go!" They replied, "We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'He may come today.'"**

**Never give up hope. Our God came, will come again, and continues to come daily. Are you watching for His coming? "Therefore, keep awake," says Jesus, for you do not know the hour.**